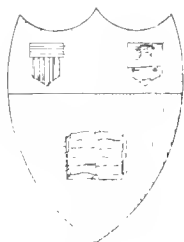


A Perfect Prince ♣ ♣

Frederic B. Jeffery



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A PERFECT PRINCE.



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From the celebrated picture of Alfred the Great in the
Bodleian Library, Oxford.

Frontispiece.

A PERFECT PRINCE

The Story of England a Thousand
Years Ago

BY

FREDERIC B. JEFFERY



LONDON

ELLIOT STOCK, 62, PATERNOSTER ROW, E.C.

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PREFACE

IN presenting this condensed biography of England's one and only Alfred, the writer wishes it to be understood that it is intended primarily for that large section of the public who, while desiring to be duly posted in current topics, have little time for reading exhaustive treatises, even upon the most important and interesting subjects, outside their own proper spheres of activity. His aim has been to give such a glimpse of the man (whose name is at present upon so many tongues) and of his times as shall convey to the reader, not only the chief facts that History has handed down or Tradition suggested, but more especially an impression of their actuality, there being a confessed tendency abroad to regard our first and greatest national hero rather as a myth than as a veritable man.

As regards Tradition, it may be objected that it scarce deserves a place in History. The writer thinks otherwise. Where there is smoke there is fire. These old tales give us, if not facts, at least the

impression which the actors and their acts made upon the minds of those who lived nearest them in time and place. Properly considered, therefore, Tradition may present, as a realistic effort, a more vital idea of a subject than the hard mosaic of History.

The writer has carefully collated the ancient authorities with modern critics. Among the former the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, of course, ranks first in importance; while Asser's 'Life of Alfred' is a good second. Among the latter, Mr. Thomas Hughes and Mr. Freeman have been especially suggestive. The writer also wishes here to acknowledge his indebtedness to many friends in various parts of the country who have sent him local information and illustrations.

With these remarks the writer entrusts this, his first venture in book-making, to the indulgent public, in the hope that it may fill an empty niche in its bookshelf.

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‘Behold a pupil of the monkish gown,
The pious Alfred, King to Justice dear ;
Lord of the harp and liberating spear ;
Mirror of princes !’

WORDSWORTH.

‘A man shall be as a hiding-place from the
wind and a covert from the tempest . . . as a
shadow of a great rock in a weary land.’

ISAIAH

PROLOGUE

‘**A** THOUSAND years in Thy sight are but as yesterday when it is passed, and as a watch in the night,’ said the Lawgiver and Leader of the Hebrew nation, as he addressed the Almighty Inhabitant of the Heavens ; and so to Eternal Wisdom and Knowledge it needs must seem, but—it is not so to the children of men.

A thousand years ! Pause for a moment. About one in a million can recollect a century. And when we find such a patriarch, ‘How everything is changed since my day !’ he mumbles, as he contemplates the outward world, its manners, customs, social life ; its machinery of business, of politics, of religion : ‘all, all is changed.’ The white-beard shakes his head, for the days of his lost youth are more real to him than those of the present, which seem but dreams, for ‘the thoughts of youth are long, long thoughts.’ It is only as the old man looks *within* that he sees himself the same ego, entity, soul—if so be he possess enough essential vitality to know he lives at all. And why

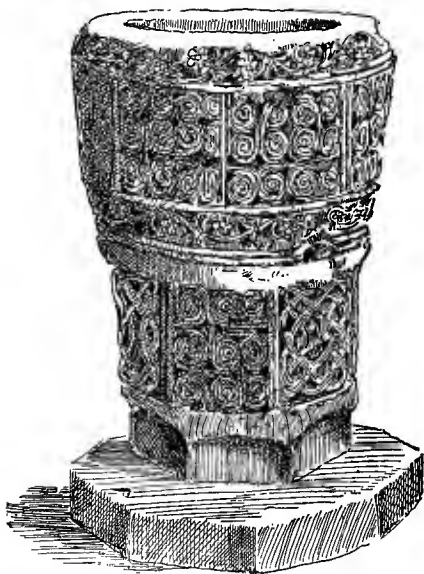
is there this difference of sentiment? Is it not that the outward man is correlated to matter that eternally changes, progresses—evolves, if you will—changes, any way; while the inner man is correlated to Him who declares, ‘I am the Lord : I change not.’

And if a hundred years bring such change to the world, and they that dwell therein, what of ten times a hundred? I believe that most of us, when we can give ourselves pause to think, like to carry ourselves back in thought to the long-agoes of history. But the present is ever with us so exactly that few of us have time to pore over the dry bones of history. Yet, but for the one-time owners of certain bleached *material* fragments, what might we be to-day? What, but for the possessors of those that for a century have lain upon the fields of Spain and Belgium, might Britain—ay, and half Europe—have been to-day? Where, but for those of the freedom-loving and Truth (with a big T, please!) loving men of the seventeenth century, would be our liberty in the State and our liberty in Christ to-day—so far as human judgment can go? Where, but for those of them that lie full fathom five, or fifty, beneath tropic and arctic seas, would be our mercantile supremacy, our national prosperity? Surely our want of thankfulness and patriotism, as of good taste and wisdom, in neglecting the study of our national history is a common and crying disgrace to us. If the plea can be allowed at all, that there is

not time for its pursuit in the desperate rush and hand-to-hand struggle of to-day, it must only be allowed in extenuation, and not in acquittal. We *ought* to remember our past. It would teach, guide, ennoble—interest us, at any rate.

It is under this conviction that I now endeavour to attract attention to a period of our national life of which we as a people are strangely ignorant. I would take you back to the life and reign of that man who, just a thousand years ago, finished his well-run course, laid down his earthly crown and received his heavenly one, and with it—what he assuredly valued more—the ‘Well done!’ of his one Overlord and Master.

May I be enabled to prophesy to these dry bones of history, that they may become living, sentient men and women before our view!



ANCIENT FONT IN DEERHURST CHURCH. (The ornamentation indicates
a date not later than eighth century.)

(By permission of Mr. W. North, Tewkesbury.)

CHAPTER I

He shall be called Elf's Wisdom

A THOUSAND years or so ago the little Berkshire town of Wantage was known as Wantwick, or Wanating, while the shire was known as Berrocshire, from a great wood, chiefly of box-trees, which occupied a large tract of the country thereabouts. The little burg, or burh (a word which means in Anglo-Saxon a fortified place) must have had then, as it has now, a pleasant situation, nestling among its wooded slopes and verdant meadows at the base of the chalk ridge which runs east and west nearly across the shire. The word *county*, remember, was as yet unknown in England.

But at that period Wantage was of greater relative importance than now, since it was a royal burg and contained one of the residences, or halls, of the Kings of West Saxony, or Wessex, and formed part of a royal manor.

Now, upon an *uncertain* morning in the year A.D. 849, Wantwick was in a state of some excite-

ment ; and, as history records the event of that day in less than a dozen words, I take the liberty of filling in the details thereof, in a similar manner to the modern journalist who extends a brief cablegram into a goodly paragraph.

Let us imagine the scene. The women, flaxen-haired and fair, stand at the doorways of their one-storied wooden dwellings, built not unlike those that travellers see in Norway to-day. They are absorbed in an interesting gossip ; while here and there a leather-aproned smith, a linen-tunicked worker in gold and silver, or a sallow-faced weaver, stands apart discussing the news. Men and women alike look and nod towards where, a little higher than the burghers' houses, stands the King's hall. A vill-priest* as he comes down from the royal lodge is beset by eager questioners ; while certain brightly attired women, whose carefully dressed hair, hanging in long curls from beneath their linen hoods, proclaim them to be wives and daughters of cheorls, or freemen, and who come bustling in the clerk's footsteps, are quite the heroines of the hour. Presently a portly man, in a goodly woollen tunic, whose broad hem is worked in threads of blue and gold, is seen issuing from the largest house in the town. He walks, not without dignity, towards the King's hall. As he passes along we notice he wears a silk cap with a feather held in place by a golden brooch ; a belt of leather marks

* *I.e.*, a parish priest not belonging to any monastic order.

the zone where his waist should be, while from his neck depends a chain of curious goldwork. His legs, unlike those of his male gossiping neighbours, are hosed, while his feet are clad in long-toed boots of soft brown leather. He is saluted by the burghers with that respectful familiarity that denotes him to be *primus inter equales*; that, but nothing more!

‘Good-inorrow, Friend Algar! goest thou to the King his hall?’

‘Even as thou sayest,’ replies the Wick-gerefe, or Town-reeve—for such is the portly one’s office: ‘I carry from our guild as a good-will offering a caudle-cup of silver for our Lady Osberga her new babe. Edmund the clerk hath gone but now to fetch water from the holy well wherewith Healstan the Bishop may make the bairn into a Christian. It is a promising babe, the priest sayeth.’

‘And if he make a good man he will not be one too many,’ replied the first speaker; ‘we shall need a many such an we wish not to be eaten up by these accursed Northern pagans, who I hear are again at their devil’s work on the coast of Kent. What may be the bairn’s name?’

‘Ælfred!’

‘That sounds un-Christian, but an he have the Ælf’s rede * in his head, with God’s grace in his heart, and a strong arm to boot, why, then we may live to bless the day of his birth. Wilt tell the King,

* Elf’s cunning or wisdom.

an thou have speech of him, that Dunstan the smith would forge a sword for the young Atheling? None shall be truer-tempered in all Wessex, I ween.'

'I'll warrant thee, Neighbour Dunstan. The King shall know, thou mayest be sure.'

This interview 'twixt the Reeve and the worthy smith is not recorded in either of the old chronicles, but it may serve as a slight impressionist effort to introduce my subject. For since no less a literary giant than Wordsworth has allowed himself to imagine how King Alfred addressed his followers on one occasion, may not a humble student follow the master's example and record what *may have* taken place that day at Wantage? Therefore, as the Reeve goeth to the great hall, let us follow him. Approaching the main building, we see it to be a large, oblong edifice, built of large flints, carefully laid in a white mortar, with courses of second-hand, flat Roman bricks laid obliquely, by way of ornamentation; the whole not unlike, I expect, some of the large Dissenting chapels at the beginning of the nineteenth century, save that the windows of this royal lodge are even narrower than those of the meeting-house, and that they are wind-ows (*i.e.* wind-doors) in verity, since the gentle zephyr or the boisterous gale alike enters them unlet by glass or horn. Be it clearly understood at once that the hall or manor-house of the ninth century bore no resemblance to the Norman castle of the eleventh and twelfth centuries. The Saxons of

this period did not fight from within stone walls nor from the tops of towers. When they acted on the defensive their fortifications were high earthworks, crowned with a stockade of wood, and surrounded with a deep trench, as were those of their new foes the Danes, and their ancient ones, the Britons. The King's hall at Wantage and probably part of the town, were within such a rampart and foss, while a wooden paling ran round about the hall and its out-buildings to keep horses and cattle from straying.

As the Reeve approached the low arched porch he received the free-and-easy salutes of the swordmen and bowmen who stood there on guard. Cheorls were they of the manor, freemen, yeomen of later times, who while Æthelwulf the King was at Wantage had doffed their linen and hempen tunics and put on their ox-hide doublets, or may be, if they aspired to such things, their coats of scale-armour, and had come, as in love and duty bound, to attend their liege lord. Idling behind these, or moving here and there, fetching and tending, were many thralls and house-slaves, whose collars of iron told of their low estate. Horses stood tethered to rings in the outer wall, saddled and with bridles on.

We enter the hall in the wake of our friend the Reeve. The walls are of considerable height; the roof low-pitched and open, supported by massive oaken beams. The apparent altitude of the room is, doubtless, heightened by the cloud of smoke that pretty

well obscures the blackened rafters. As our eyes become more accustomed to the thick and pungent atmosphere, we notice a circular opening in each of the gable ends close to the roof. These holes are the latest invention of the ninth century for getting rid of the smoke nuisance within doors. Less-cultured and more old-fashioned folks were then, and for a long time after, still content with a hole in the middle of the roof directly over the hearth-stone, which occupied the centre of the halls of the quality. But the old system had many disadvantages ; the down-draught often dammed back the smoke so that the atmosphere became so dense as to make anything at the far end of the room invisible, necessitating loud calls when the Eorl or Thegn wanted to know if his cup-bearer or his neatherd was present, a matter of no little difficulty when the lungs were filled with fumes of naphtha and other products of wood combustion. Then, under the old system, the rain and the snow came in too freely for the comfort of the occupiers. But the opposite-hole system made the room as snug as any Teuton of the ninth century could wish, since it acted—more or less effectually—as a patent cowl ; for if the wind blew *in* at the northern opening, why, it blew the smoke *out* at the southern one, and *vice versâ* ; and if the wind was westerly or easterly, why, then it did the best it could for the folks.

But to return to the King's hall. At one end we

notice heavy curtains hanging across the room, embroidered with a strange mixture of Christian and pagan symbolism, probably typifying the victory of the Cross over heathenism. These, the Reeve tells us, cover the doorways of various private and royal chambers. One is the King's chapel, for, be it known, Æthelwulf, Lord of the West Saxons and Overlord, or Bretwalda, of England, is a pious man, much given to meditation, and punctilious in performance of his religious vows and offices. Another is his scriptorium (study we should call it) and bed-chamber, while a third is to-day the centre of attraction. Before it stand or sit several women, priding themselves upon their superior knowledge of the mysteries within, of which mere men, be they eorls* or cheorls, gildmen or thralls, cannot be expected to know aught. At the other end of the hall are more small chambers, which are set apart for such lords, spiritual and temporal, as may be at Court.

As to furniture, the great hall is bare enough. Along each side-wall stretches a rough table, literally a board upon trestles, leaving the centre of the lower part of the hall below the great hearth free for those who come, or go, or lounge about. The floor of beaten earth is strewn with fresh straw, while

* The word 'eorl,' among the Anglo-Saxons up to the time of the Danish supremacy in England, signified a man of good birth. 'Eorls' were the gentry in distinction to the cheorls, or yeomen. Afterwards it became a distinct degree—the Earl.

around the fire stand many wooden stools, with arms but without backs. Some of these are already occupied by long-haired, fair-complexioned men, whose tunics and golden bracelets proclaim them to be Thēgns* of the shire.

On the opposite side of the fire to them some thick planks of timber are laid upon the ground, and upon these there is an oaken chair, whereof the arms and back are carved in bold relief with many a strange animal couchant beneath a Saxon-patterned cross that surmounts the whole. Herein sits a man of noble appearance: it is the King. Let us look at him more closely. A fine head, well thatched with an abundance of waving yellow hair, is fitly placed upon a well-built, muscular body; but the blue eyes, deep set beneath their straight brows, suggest by their expression that their owner is more prone to a contemplative than to an active life. Over a dark blue tunic he wears a loose mantle of crimson trimmed and lined with white and black marten skins. A circlet of gold is upon his head, while a massive chain of the same metal suspends a wooden cross of Latin shape from his neck.

At his feet sit two small boys, while a third, rather older, stands at his elbow. These are his three nestlings; the eldest son, Athelstan, has already

* 'Thēgns,' pronounced 'thanes,' were the smaller lords of the shires, who owned at least five hides, *i.e.*, 600 acres, of land. An Ealderman must needs have had forty hides,

flown away, and is now Under-King of Kent. Near by the King there sits a man wearing a Churchman's gown and a rosary, but as the gown falls open we see within a serviceable doublet of fine leather; from beneath the lower hem of which peeps forth the skirt of a shirt of chain-mail. This is Healstan, or Ealstan—for in the ninth century there is great liberty as regards the aspirate—the hard-handed, hard-headed Bishop of Sherborne, equally good at fighting devils within or Danes without. Near by also there sits another man, big and burly, clad somewhat in the King's manner with fur-lined mantle. This is Æthelwulf, the Alderman of Berrocshire, a worthy who prefers the hunting-field, or eke the battlefield, to attendance at King's Court or Shire-gemot.

And now, the Reeve approaches the throne—if it may be so dignified—bows with deep respect, but kneeleth not.

‘What would good Master Algar this morning?’ inquires the monarch pleasantly enough.

‘I come, my lord King, to bring the greetings of my fellow-gildmen and burghers, and to warrant you of our prayers and good wishes for the royal babe and his mother, thy noble Lady.’

‘Thank thee, worthy Reeve! I know well my men of Wantwick want not good will nor good deeds on behalf of the House of Cerdic. The boy promiseth well, but my Lady Osberga, alas! seemeth feeble.’

‘It giveth me dole to hear that of the Lady ; but I bear in my hand, an it please thee to take it, a caudle-cup for the bairn, beaten and graven by my craft here in Wantwick.’

‘A pretty vessel, in truth, Master Algar, and of good gold, too. It is more fitted, methinks, to be among the holy vessels of thy church at Sherborne, reverend father, than to be mauled by a brat.’

‘Nay, nay ! tempt me not, Sire. I covet no vessels of gold for my minster. It may be that if we had less of the yellow metal in this land the accursed heathen would not come harrying us so often. It is like keeping honey in the house when bears are about. Besides, a babe of such prophetic promise needs must be fed from a kingly cup.’

‘Dost believe in dreams, my Ealstan ?’ asked the King in an undertone, while his eyes had a far-away look.

‘In very truth, when thrice dreamed, and by a praying mother,’ replied the Bishop.

Here the Reeve made request that he might have sight of the infant.

‘That thou shalt, and all good men in hall likewise, if so be the midwife willeth it ; for though I, Æthelwulf, rule here in Wessex, yet she ruleth in my Lady’s chamber.’

A few minutes later there is an increased stir among the matrons and maids at the upper end of hall, and presently a mature and buxom dame steps

forth from between the curtains, which are held back for her by two maids, whose fine robes and golden brooches declare them to be of noble birth. She carries in her arms a bundle wrapped in soft white woollen cloth, and advances with conscious importance towards the King's seat. He rises, and all that are in hall crowd around, careful, however, to give precedence to whom it is due, for Æthelwulf's eyes are upon them. The Bishop and the Alderman, with the King's three boys, form the inner circle. The next comprises the thegns, with whom, as Reeve of the royal burgh, stands Algar the goldsmith. Then come the cheorls, many of whom had come up to attend their liege lords the thegns. Last of all is a crowd of thralls and bond-slaves.

The wrappings are laid back, and all whose vision is unimpeded see for the first time him whom many of them will hereafter follow exultingly to battle, listen to with all admiration as he speaks in Witan-gemote, in hall, or in council—him whose name shall be beloved by subjects, feared by enemies, honoured by neighbours, and respected by all; him who shall in the darkest hour prove to be 'England's comfort,' her saviour.

The King lifts his hand for silence.

'I speak not to belittle thee, Æthelbald, or thee, Æthelberht, or thee, Æthelred—God forbid that I should do that, my sons! for punish me He justly might if I showed undue favour—but I would have

you know that my love goeth strangely out towards this helpless babe. His mother—whom may God and His saints strengthen!—had, ere he came forth, strange dreams and visions as to him, like unto those that Joseph dreamed in his father's house. But undue uplifting for him I wish not, nor will it, though I do pray that he may be as great a blessing to his brethren and his people as was the youngest son of Jacob.'

'Amen,' quoth Bishop Ealstan, in a voice that filled the great hall. 'And now, King, since the priest Edmund hath returned, let us make the boy a Christian at once ere the devil get to work. Fetch the font, some of ye, from the King's chapel, and, Master Mass-sayer, bring hither the water from Augustine's well.'

'Nay, reverend Bishop,' objected the King; 'shall we not to the hallowed shrine?'

'What need, King? Thy hall serves as well when the water is consecrated, and thy good friends and subjects can all see him here and be his sponsors, an they will,' replied the Bishop.

In a few moments the Sacrament was celebrated, and the babe became, through the act, as they fondly believed, a son of God as truly as he was a son of man.

Now when he had finished the short office, during which all present, even the women, kept proper silence, this remarkable example of muscular Chris-

tianity, this militant Churchman, held the babe up in his hands for all to behold.

‘See, my Saxons and men of Kent, your lord King’s latest bairn. He is weak now, but he shall be strong, I prophesy. Shout for him, my merry men! Shout, thegns and cheorls! Shout and swear to serve him as a son of Cerdic deserves!’

As the Bishop lowered the little fellow from his elevated position, his tiny hand grasped at the cross-hilt of his father’s sword, and, with that strange power of grip that new-borns have, held fast to it.

‘Aha!’ cried the Bishop. ‘See, our Alfred hath taken firm grip of the Cross and the sword already; it is an omen of Divine import. *Laus Deo!*’

Whereat the assembly shouted such a shout that it was heard a mile away, and drove the startled daws and swallows in fright from their nests among the rafters.

Thus, thinks the writer, Alfred, son of Æthelwulf, son of Egbert, the descendant of Woden, hero and demigod, *may have been* acknowledged and proclaimed son of the King of England and of the King of kings. May have been, I say, for, mark! *all* that the sober historian has written of our hero’s birth and infancy is:

‘In the year of our Lord’s Incarnation 849 was born Alfred, King of the Anglo-Saxons, at the royal village (*sic*) of Wanating in Berroc-shire.’

CHAPTER II

'The Child grew . . . and was in favour with God and Man'

FOUR years pass away during which we hear nothing of the child Alfred, from either of the chroniclers or from his biographer Asser, the Welsh monk.

Doubtless during these years he moved about with the Court from shire to shire, from royal burg to royal burg, for the West Saxon Kings seem to have had no abiding-place. Winchester was their chief station, but it saw little more of them than did Exeter in the extreme West, or Canterbury in the East. They went where duty called or necessity led them. Their chief source of livelihood, the wherewithal to feed their numerous household, was the produce of their own manors; so they passed from one to another, staying as long at each as its resources made convenient.

We may easily imagine how his mother Osberga during these years watched over and cherished her youngest born, as mothers often have a way of doing. Besides, it is evident, although the fact is not recorded, that she died before Easter, 855. Pro-

bably she had premonitions of the approach of the angel that summons souls hence, and hastened with a mother's yearning solicitude to imbue her baby-boy's heart with the sentiment of love, teaching his budding mind those truths that become a Christian and a King, so that when she should be called up higher the best *goods* she could leave would be left, not *to*, but *in* him. How, too, she would have lavished her affection upon the boy, that her memory might be to him a blessed one, till he also in the by-and-by should be summoned to rejoin her in the dwelling-place of many mansions! I say there is no record of this, save as it is written in his life. But in that is not a mother's love writ large?

Those four years were troublous ones for England. The marauding Norsemen were growing each season more daring. No longer are they content to make sudden descents upon the country lying near the coast, and then make off with their booty; they now land large armies and march far inland with seeming intent to take the land itself. It is history repeating itself; but neither Saxon nor Angle sees it in that light. Britain is theirs now, and long has been—that is, all save its western and northern hill regions, where indeed the Celtic tribes still hold their ground. They have occupied and settled down in the best parts of the island for many generations now. They have cultivated the fertile valleys; their flocks and herds wander over the grassy uplands, their swine roam the great woods. They have built

towns and learnt many arts and crafts. They are Christians—of a sort—and have forgotten the old wandering, swash-buckler days of Hengist and Horsa. And now these peaceful, ease-loving respectabilities are being treated by the savage pagans from the Northern wilds in the same rude and unpleasant manner that their own sires had treated the Britons.

To retrace our steps for a moment. In the year before that in which our hero was born, these pirates landed in force on the Somersetshire coast and worked inland, carrying away everything they could carry, and burning everything else. Our friend Ealstan, of Sherborne, slipping off his mitre and dropping his crosier, put on a steel cap, grasped his axe, and hied him forth with Eanwulf, the Alderman of the Somersætas, and Osric, the Alderman of the Dorsetas, and fell upon the heathen men and smote them sore, where the town of Bridgewater now stands.

In the year 851—that is, when Alfred was two years old—the Danish fleet came to the Thames Estuary. Landing on the Kentish coast, they sacked Canterbury; then, getting aboard their ships again, they sailed up to London, already the largest trading centre of the island. This, too, though a fortified place, was—to use the language of the old chronicler—‘broken’ by the daring Norsemen. Now, the present capital of the Empire was not then included in Wessex proper, but was the chief town of the old Saxon kingdom of East-sex, or Essex, though at this

period the King of the West Saxons was also King of the East Saxons ; howbeit the two States had separate great councils of wise-men.

We do not know where Alfred's father was when the Danes took such liberties with his burg of London, but we soon hear of him *after* that event. A paved Roman road—'the Stane Street'—then ran from London to Chichester, remains of which may still be seen near Dorking. Now, for some reason or other the enemy, after leaving London, marched along this road ; it may have been that they intended to reach the southern coast and there rejoin their ships ; or else they were in search of more spoil.

Well, the King and his son Æthelbald heard of their movements, and marched with the men of Surrey and Berkshire and Hampshire to Leith Hill, or, rather, to the ridge of which that forms a part. They watched the Danes come marching along the road, laden with their loot. As soon as the latter were near enough to the foot of the hill, the Saxons swooped down upon them. The place at which the enemy were was then called Ac-lea—that is, Oak-plain—but it is now known as Ockley. Unable to stand against Æthelwulf and his men, they turned and fled, leaving a great number of their warriors and all their spoils in the hands of the Saxons. Alfred's earliest recollection would probably, therefore, have been the news of this victory arriving at Winchester, or whatever place may then have been the head-quarters of the

Court ; and we can well imagine the child being held up to see the bearded and bloodstained, but victorious, troops march into the burg, amid the rejoicing of everyone around ; and remember, my readers of 1901, that victory meant infinitely more to those men and women than a victory gained by our soldiers in a far-off land does to us, since a defeat would have entailed to them appalling results. So decisive was this battle that Asser, Alfred's monkish friend, states in his biography that 'the greater part of the pagan multitude was cut to pieces, so that we never heard of their being so defeated, in any country, in one day.'

This victory, together with two later actions in the same year, in which the heathen were also worsted—one at Sandwich in Kent, and the other at Wicgamburg in Devon (probably now Wembury, near Plymouth)—seems to have taught these Northern Ishmaelites a lesson, as after this for several years they left Æthelwulf's kingdom severely alone.

Now, after these things Æthelwulf the Pious purposed to carry out an intention he long had had of visiting the holy shrines of the Apostles Peter and Paul at the Imperial City, and of communing in *propria persona* with the Bishop of Rome, then already acknowledged to be the Head of the Western Church. But from some cause or another he was not ready to go until the year 853 ; and then, just as he was about to set out, there came word from Buhred, King of Mercia (the district that now con-

stitutes the Midlands), that he was hard beset by Rhodric Mawr, King of the Britons of Wales. Æthelwulf, as Bretwalda, or Over-King, of England, could not but go to his vassal's assistance, so there was good-bye to his trip to Rome that year. What think you he did? Not being able to make the pilgrimage himself, he sent, as his proxy and ambassador, his boy Alfred, aged four! I think we see, in this choice of the youngest, and almost infant, son, an indication that Æthelwulf and his wife Osberga had an intuition, or a revelation, that Alfred was something more than *one* of their sons; that he was, in fact, ordained of heaven to be a chosen vessel of God. He was sent off, 'we are told, 'with an honourable escort,' and doubtless a strong and well-armed one, as was necessary in those days. He would have crossed the Channel from some port on the Sussex coast, in one of the long galleys of the day, to somewhere on the coast of Flanders, and thence on horseback—but surely in a pannier—through the heart of Old Gaul, then the territory of Charles the Bald, King of the Western Franks. I must tell you that at this time all the mainland of Western Europe, save Spain, was divided into three parts. A narrow strip from the Mediterranean to the North Sea was under the direct rule of Lothaire, with the title of Holy Roman Emperor, while his brothers, Charles and Lewis, ruled as much as they respectively could to the west and east of this zone.

The child Alfred, with his nurses and servants, his body-guard, under one or more thegns, and doubtless in company with many a Churchman of rank, would progress by short stages from one warrior noble's castle to another, from convent to convent, or from walled town to walled town. They would call at Charles's Court, then probably at Compiègne; from whence, passing on, they would cross the Alps by the pass now known as that of St. Bernard. Northern Italy, especially near the mountains, had an ill repute in that age—and after. But the bandits must have had a wholesome respect for English swords and axes, if not for Churchmen's curses, since the party reached Rome without any mishap worthy of record. A boy that had travelled on horseback a thousand miles over moor and morass, through wood and water, over high mountains and across far-stretching plains, ere he was five years old might well turn out to be a remarkable man. And that is what old Pope Leo IV. seems to have thought, judging by his acts. He received the boy with great honour, and 'adopted him as his spiritual son,' though what that phrase of Asser's may mean is doubtful. It may be, but I think it extremely unlikely, that Alfred had not been baptized till then, and that Leo stood godfather to him. It can scarcely be believed that such a religious and good—that is, strict—Churchman as Æthelwulf would have risked the manifold dangers of the world for his favourite child by leaving him unbaptized; for,

remember, baptismal regeneration was already the general tenet of the Western Church. It probably meant some honorary distinction with which the pontiff honoured those whom he would. But he did what seems to be a strange thing. He anointed or 'hallowed' him 'as King of the West Saxons.' So far as contemporary history speaks, such a step was no more thought to be beneficial or befitting for a future King of England in those days than it is now. The whole story may have been the invention of monkish writers ; or it may have been—to use a vulgarism—a put-up job of the ecclesiastics at Rome, with an eye to gaining more influence over the affairs of the distant islands, since the Churchmen of Britain and of Ireland were very backward in recognising Papal supremacy. It has been suggested that it was done at the request of Æthelwulf, by way of smoothing the road for his favourite but youngest son to the kingship ; but I cannot think Æthelwulf to have been so weak. Whatever it signifies, the act is recorded by three separate historians of the period, and must be, therefore, accepted as a fact.*

Now let us pause for a moment, and think how

* In one edition of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicles the following passage occurs : 'When Pope Leo heard that he (Æthelwulf) was dead, he blessed Alfred as King, and held him to episcopal hands, as his father Æthelwulf in sending him thither had requested.' The paragraph is probably an interpolation of later days, as it does not occur in the oldest MSS. It has the savour of a Romanizing monk, though the rumour of the King's death supplies a plausible explanation of the difficulty.

this visit to the Eternal City must have affected the young Prince. The journey thither, with its continually shifting panorama, could have been to his budding mind no more than a confused dream. But arrived at Rome, the cessation of movement would produce a distinct impression. The stately and beautiful buildings, of an order of architecture so different to what he was accustomed to; the ornate ceremonial, the gorgeous vestments, the decorated shrines within the churches of the Eternal City, seen by him day after day, could not have failed to leave their permanent mark upon his mind. He was too young, recollect, to notice, or to understand if he had noticed, any of the jealousy and suspicion, the plotting and trickery, of the contending factions in Rome, which were so soon to break out into open conflict. It would only be the outward show that appealed to his child-mind.

It is uncertain how long young Alfred remained in Rome. He may have returned home in the autumn of 853, or he may have stayed till the arrival and departure of his father two years later. At any rate, history is clear upon the point of his being there in company with Æthelwulf in 855, with whom he returned to England. On the face of it, it seems hardly likely that the boy would have been brought home for so short a while if his father had purposed, as there is scarce a doubt he did, going to Rome as soon as he could leave his kingdom. If we adopt the view of those who think Alfred waited in Rome for his father, then we can see a practical

explanation of the Pope 'adopting' him—that is, making him one of his family, since no place could have been so safe as Leo's palace to keep a young Prince out of the way of rogues. But, on the other hand, if the boy did not go back in this interval, I fear we must give up our belief in a certain cherished tale of our childhood. I refer to that wherein their mother shows the three young Princes a beautiful book, which she promises to the first of them who shall learn to read it. Of course it was Alfred, the 'Baby,' that gained the prize, young as he was. How often since has that story been used by fond mothers to spur on the lagging mental powers of their little ones! Now,

'I would not have a mystery
Throw doubt upon *my* darling story,'

any more than does the poet upon another and more beautiful legend. Neither do I do so, for the mystery lies only in finding the circumstances in which the incident could have happened. A wanton iconoclast is worthy of the whip if the image he break be a beautiful one; but where doubts intrude it is better to face and fight them—for truth must prevail. Now, Asser records the incident as having happened when Alfred was twelve years old, which is an impossibility. We do not know, as has been said, when Osberga did die, but she was dead by the autumn of 855, for then Æthelwulf took unto himself another wife. Therefore Osberga could not

have made the offer later than the beginning of that year. Possibly, if Alfred was a precocious child, he might have learnt enough for a fond mother to call reading at six years of age, though it is extremely unlikely. But *if* she did so award the prize, it presupposes the return of Alfred from Rome after his visit there in 853. Therefore it is necessary—in order to retain the story as a historical fact—either to take Asser's statement of age to be an error, or else to accept another hypothesis, namely, that it was not the actual mother, but the stepmother, that was the encourager of learning in the boys—an idea which my readers will scarce entertain when we arrive at the period of the latter lady's sojourn at the Court of Æthelwulf.

To come, then, to the year 855. Æthelwulf's long desire to see Rome and its shrines and to converse with His Holiness was at last gratified ; and let us hope that he was satisfied with what he saw and heard. Father and son are there together, and the little fellow in his childish way will be showing his parent the sights of the place, and pointing out its great churches and great men. But the English King probably saw such sights and heard such things as must have caused a rude shock to his loyal and simple belief in the Divine appointment of the Bishop of Rome as the visible Head of the Church on earth. I say *probably*, since we are not sure at what period of the year Æthelwulf arrived in Rome.

What a year that was in Rome! Some time in

the spring brave old Leo went the way of all flesh. And a brave man he was, indeed! One who had to face and quell bitter quarrels within the Church, and pagan foes from without. He did both equally well. But now he is gone. The dominant Vatican party at once, and with unseemly haste, elect Benedict, third of the name, as his successor, without consulting or waiting to hear from the Emperor Lothaire, according to the custom of the period. The latter protested against the election; the people of Rome sided with the clerical opposition, and shouted for the Emperor. Terrible riots followed. Benedict fled, and the opposition elevated one Joan to the Papal chair. Then came a reaction. Benedict came back, and we hear no more of Joan. 'Tis as well, perhaps, for he was an Englishman; and are we not rather proud than otherwise that, out of two hundred and fifty-seven Popes, there has been only one Englishman since Joan? It is enough!

But, whoever was Pope when Æthelwulf was at the Vatican, we may be sure that he was well received, since loyal Kings were scarce just then, and the friendship of a Prince who had struggled manfully and with fair success against the Northern heathen was one worth cultivating. Besides, did he not bring in his hand much gold and silver for the Holy Father and for St. Peter's shrine? Among other things which we read of our Æthelwulf doing while at Rome was the rebuilding and re-endowing of the Saxon Schools—*i.e.*, colleges for the training of

Saxon priests. The shrines of SS. Peter and Paul each came in for a hundred marks 'for the filling of the Easter lamps.'

Father and son set out on their return journey probably in July of the same year. If Alfred had been too young to receive clear mental impressions when he reached Rome in 853, he certainly now must have carried away with him many permanent recollections of the Eternal City—of her ancient buildings, magnificent even in decay; of her modern churches and palaces, rich and inspiring in their glory; of her refinements of art and music, to which he was a stranger—recollections that did colour his after-life, and might have resulted in a cultured England in the tenth century if his environment had proved more propitious to such a result. But the time was not yet.

On the road home they spent some time at the magnificent Court of Charles, nicknamed the Bald, the centre at that epoch of all that could be called culture outside of Italy. The Court was then at Verberie, and among the royal household was a certain John Erigena, a Scot—that is, please understand, a native of what *we* call Ireland. This John was tutor to the Royal Family, and during the stay of the English party, which lasted many weeks at least, Alfred would have been one of his scholars, having for his school-mates the young Charles, a boy about a year older than he, and the latter's sister Judith, a clever and beautiful girl of fourteen.

Young Charles had already been crowned Under-King of Aquitaine and left in that province as a token of his father's overlordship. But the turbulent nobles thereof had soon returned him to his home with—or without—thanks. Of this Charles we in this little history shall hear no more. Of the tutor we shall. And what of Judith? Do you—who know not the story—think that Alfred fell in love with his older schoolmate, as boys of six sometimes do? He may have. Deponent stateth not. But one day, as they were at lessons, the girl was summoned away, and ere the day was out the boy heard that she was going to be married to—I do not say going to marry—his father! The ill-assorted wedding of this Saxon King of sixty to the blooming French girl of fourteen was celebrated with great magnificence at the palace on October 1 by Hincmar, Archbishop of Rheims, the most powerful Churchman of the day outside Rome. The specialized form of ritual of the Gallic Church that was used on the occasion is said to be still extant.

After the ceremony the girl-wife was placed on a throne by the King's side and crowned as Queen.* Nothing remarkable about that, it may be said. There was, though! and the report thereof was received with much disfavour in Wessex. You may have noticed that I have never spoken of

* The Saxon word was *Cwen*—literally, ‘wife.’ The King's consort was styled emphatically ‘the wife.’ Hence *cwen* became ‘queen,’ or ‘king's wife.’

Osberga as Queen. That is because the title was not permitted her. Why so, in the name of holy matrimony? I will tell you. Beorhtric, King of the West Saxons before Egberht, had a wife named Edburgha, who was a very exacting and jealous woman—jealous not only of other women about the Court, but even of her husband's men friends, among whom was a young thegn called Warr. She resolved to rid herself of him, and, like Hamlet's stepmother, she mixed poison in his cup of pigment, a concoction of wine and other things, which doubtless it was etiquette for ladies to compound with their own fair hands for their lords' delectation. Young Warr drank—and died. But the King also drank of the same cup, in token of amity—and he died too. Edburgha fled to the Court of Charlemagne, who placed her in a convent. But the wise men of Wessex, in gemote assembled, decreed that no woman thereafter should be crowned as Queen. Thus the innocent suffered for the guilty, and neither Egberht nor Æthelwulf's wife had been crowned. But now, forsooth, this latter is bringing home a girl-wife whom he has had crowned Queen without even consulting his wise men. It was too much!

Æthelwulf's eldest son, Æthelstan of Kent, is dead, and Æthelbald, the next one, is Regent in his father's absence. He takes council with Ealstan the Bishop; and Eanwulf, Alderman of Somerset, and they, with other leading men, meet in Sel-wood

—the *Silva Magna* of the Latinists—and make a solemn compact. What it was we know not, but when the King lands from his galley he finds the people much divided in sentiment. One part is ready to fight for him, and the other part against him.

There is a folk-saying that there is no fool like an old fool. Rules have their exceptions; for, seeing how the wind blew, Æthelwulf wisely trimmed his sails so as to avoid a civil war, an evil deplorable at all times, but when begirt with foreign foes, as the English States were, absolutely suicidal. Æthelbald takes the control of Wessex proper, while the old King contents himself with his young wife and the sub-kingdom of Kent.

Æthelwulf and Judith lived as King and Queen of Kent for nearly three years, and then the former died. Alfred, who would now be between eight and nine, had lived with them, it seems. Now, what, think you, does this poor young widow of scarce seventeen when bereft of her husband? Why, in a very short time she again marries! Whom? Why, Æthelbald, her late husband's eldest son and successor—an act so abhorrent to Christian ethics and morals as to scandalize all civilized Europe. It is said that some Teutonic tribes countenanced such marriages in their pagan days, but that was no excuse for either Æthelbald or Judith.

Alfred now went to live with his next eldest brother, Æthelberht, who took charge of Kent. This brother was of a studious turn of mind and

religious, so doubtless our young Prince benefited by being with him. Whether Alfred was very horrified at Judith marrying her stepson or not there is no evidence to show. We must remember he was still quite a small boy, and possibly fascinated by this fair French Judith. One thing at least we know, and that is, he could not have retained any strong aversion to her, since in after-life we find him giving his own daughter Elfreda to the eldest son of his one time stepmother-sister-in-law and her third husband, Baldwin, Count of Flanders.

Æthelbald, like his father, only enjoyed this charmer's society for about two years, when Judith became a widow again; whereupon, to finish her story here in England, she sold all her possessions in the country, and took herself and all her charms back to her father's Court.

Alfred was now about eleven years old—quite a youth in those times, I suspect. According to Æthelwulf's will, which had been confirmed by the Witan at that time, the crown of Wessex and the Bretwaldaship was to pass to Æthelred upon Æthelbald's death, passing over Æthelberht altogether. But now the Witan, judging doubtlessly that Æthelred was not old enough to manage so large and troublesome a trust, elected the elder brother to the supreme throne.

Here it had better be explained that among the Anglo-Saxons the Crown, though kept strictly to royal stock, yet did not of necessity follow in the

line of primogeniture. The particular member of the Royal Family to succeed was generally nominated by the King, but the actual election appears to have been in the hands of the Witan.

Æthelberht reigns for six years without question on the part of either of his younger brothers, who live with him in all amity. During these years the Danes become once more troublesome, making two or three descents upon the Southern kingdom. Once they actually reach Winchester, the then chief city in England, and, alas! reduce it to ruins. But the Aldermen of Hampton-shire and Berroc-shire come upon them (apparently without the King's assistance) and smite them sore.

We hear literally nothing of Alfred during this period, but doubtless he was busy acquiring the arts of peace and of war, in each of which he was shortly to shine forth as a star of the first magnitude in our Western heavens. His religious training had probably been chiefly in the hands of that Swithin, Bishop of Winton (*i.e.*, Winchester), the anniversary of whose canonization is supposed to have such an arbitrary influence on our summer's weather. The old man died, probably of grief, in 861, shortly after the sack and burning of his beloved minster. There is still a bridge in the city called after him, whereof the core is original work—the only bit of *oldest* Winchester extant. This arch was formerly one of seventeen which spanned the river bed. How our rivers have narrowed in a thousand years!

CHAPTER III

Courtier and Courtship

I HAVE said that, according to the will of their father, Æthelbald, Æthelred, and Alfred were to follow one another on the throne of Wessex, to the exclusion of Æthelberht, whom Æthelwulf probably thought to be more fit for a monk than a king, as doubtless he was. We have seen, however, that, in spite of the will, Æthelberht took his turn at the helm of the English State with the rest of his father's sons. It cannot be supposed that he was a universal favourite, being too much of an ascetic and recluse for the popular taste; whereas of Alfred we are told by the chronicler that 'as he advanced in years . . . his form appeared more comely than his brothers', and in look, speech, and manners he was more graceful than they. He was already the darling of the people, who felt that in wisdom and other qualities he surpassed all the royal race.' Yet, though so great a favourite, and possessed of such qualifications, there is no suggestion that he attempted to dispute Æthelberht's elevation

to the throne. Neither did Æthelred do so—as in honourable fairness must be said—even though by his father's will he came after Æthelbald. Probably both felt themselves too young to act the part of leaders in such trying times. We may fairly say, therefore, that jealousy formed no part of the family character. The ethics of Christianity, which had but lately been engrafted into the stock, was bearing good fruit. Of the five sons of Æthelwulf and Osberga one alone showed, as far as we know, any evil tendencies, and even his rebellion may well be judged pardonable when we consider the circumstances. For might he not well have thought, as did hard-headed and hard-handed old Bishop Ealstan, that their father's act in marrying a child of fourteen, when he had such a family, indicated a mental weakness that unfitted him for the overlordship of England? Of course, Æthelbald at that time knew not of the witchery of Mistress Judith, and it is a curious poetic satire upon his harsh judgment of his father that he himself became enslaved by her charms.

To resume. In the year 866 Æthelberht dies, leaving only two of the brothers alive, Æthelred and Alfred. The former quietly assumes the sceptre, and Alfred is recognised as Atheling, or heir-apparent to the throne. During Æthelred's reign we find our hero acting in complete loyalty to his brother, and working in subjection to him. This is all the more

praiseworthy of the youth, insomuch that he had made application to Æthelred for a partition of certain of their father's lands and treasures according to the latter's will, and had been refused. He seems to have carried forgiveness to his brothers—for this was the second one who had refused—to a point indicating timidity and weakness. But his after-life disperses such an idea as the morning sun does night mists. His acquiescence was not servility to them, but loyalty to principle. He had his Bible; and, what was remarkable in those days, he could and did read it; what is more remarkable in those, or these, days, he believed it; and, what is yet still more remarkable, he acted upon his belief. 'Let brotherly love continue,' he read, and 'How good and pleasant a thing it is for brethren to dwell together in unity!' So he took no umbrage, nor nursed resentment, but calmly bade his time, trusting in the Lord, and waiting patiently for Him. And, in fairness to his two brothers, let it be said, that they may well have interpreted Æthelwulf's will differently from the way that Alfred then did, since we read that the latter, when he became the sole executor thereof, was bound to confess that no man living could understand some of its clauses.

Alfred continued his studies and his training, diligently exercising himself in such learning as he had means to acquire, which were very poor in England at that time. He made a speciality of his mother-

tongue, and already began to collect and edit such Anglo-Saxon literature as existed: 'But before all things,' Asser tells us, 'he was earnest in strengthening himself to keep the commandment of God and to resist the carnal desires and the rebellious thoughts which the devil puts into the minds of the young, especially of those who seek after good.' It was during these years that he collected and wrote in a small volume the offices of the hours from different liturgies, together with the Psalms of David. This book was ever afterwards carried about on his person.

Of course, he was more or less subject to the religious tendencies of his time. The errors of sacramentarianism had already undermined the simple teaching of the Gospel. It is recorded that he rose at cock-crow and repaired to church or shrine to pray, sometimes prostrating himself before the altar when temptations were besetting him hard. 'Tis said, but we scarce think it credible, that he besought the Almighty to lay upon him some sickness of body, so that it might help him to subdue his passions. One thing, at least, there can be no doubt upon; and that is, his utter earnestness and perfect integrity in his religion. It is recorded that somewhere about this time he became afflicted with a painful disorder which gave him little respite for several years. Whether this may be thought of as a beneficent answer to a pious prayer or as a judgment

for having impiously asked for what was an evil thing, or as neither this nor that, I leave my readers to decide for themselves; only, please to bear this bodily *ill of Alfred's in mind. I may, however, remark that this malady, if painful, could not have been very weakening, since we read in the old chronicles that he was a veritable Nimrod, spending—as did, indeed, most freeborn Anglo-Saxons—much time on the moors and in the woods in pursuit of fur and feather, venison and vermin.

Now we pass on to the year 868. This was a year of severe famine throughout the land. Whether the famine had aught to do with Alfred's movements, I cannot say; but during that year he made an excursion into West Wales—that is, Cornwall—there to enjoy a few weeks' sport among its hills. At that period the Celtic earldom of the West extended up to the Exe, Devonshire being then much smaller than it became later. It was practically a foreign country to the Saxon folk, who had only a few settlements here and there in the lower and more accessible spots. The natives were, of course, of a different race, and spoke a distinct language, closely allied to the Cymric of Wales proper. The people of Wessex considered them as half-barbarians, and they returned the compliment with interest. You must recollect that the Britons had accepted Christianity centuries before this, and had retained it when forced back, step by step, into the western hills by

their Teutonic and heathen conquerors; and that, when these latter were Christianized by Roman missionaries, the former refused to fraternize with them. Cornwall then, as now, had more places of worship relatively to its population than any other part of the island. Every parish had its saint, the Irish or Gallic missionary who had first taught there. Alfred, as he went about, would come across churches—and well-built stone churches, too—chapels, oratories, and holy wells on every hand, and his religious instinct would delight therein even though the local clergy looked askance at him.

One day he came near a chapel where lay buried the body of St. Guerir. In he went. I must tell you here that our hero's fancy had lately turned to thoughts of love, which had been directed towards a certain young lady, yclept Elswitha, daughter of Æthelred, Earl of the Gaini, a tribe living about what is now Gainsborough. Now, either Alfred's bodily complaint was one which precluded thoughts of wedlock, or else his pains were worse than usual that day, for we read that he threw himself down before the shrine and besought God to exchange his present ill for some other that should not render him useless nor contemptible. He remained long in urgent prayer, beseeching the intercession of the saint. When at last he arose and rode away he felt himself made whole of his old complaint.

On his road back to Court, as he travelled along

the old Roman way that ran from Cenia (on the Fal), through Isca (Exeter), to London, he may very likely have turned aside to attend the obsequies of stout old Bishop Ealstan, who, at last, after fifty years' occupation of the See of Sherborne, had gone the way of all flesh. They laid his body in the minster alongside two, at least, of the Kings he had served so well in church, in council, and on the field of battle.

Before this year 868 was out Alfred went North into Mercia, and then and there at Gainsborough was celebrated his marriage with great feasting. The revelry was kept up day and night, and we can well imagine the vast quantities of provisions that were there consumed. In our mind's eye cannot we see the huge joints of ox-meat (we must not call it beef yet), of sheep-meat, and of flesh of swine, that, trussed upon giant skewers, passed from hand to hand up and down the long common tables, while each man helped himself with his jack-knife? Then there would have been the tastier deer's flesh, the wild-boar's head, and the huge dishes of wild-fowl of sorts for the high table, where sat the Mercian Earl, the bridegroom and the bride, and the guests of quality. For drink there would have been ale and mead for general consumption—and very freely too, I am sorry to say, was it consumed in those days—while those of high birth had also wine and various fancy mixtures, such as the one in which Queen Edburgha

mixed the poison. There would have been much noise, growing louder and louder as barrel after barrel of ale was emptied. Then the harpers would begin to recite their songs, some of which would be improvised in glorification of those in whose honour the feast was given. Such occasions so often led to quarrels and even bloodshed—we are told by old writers—that it became needful for the lord of the manor to forbid the cheorls to go to hall armed, while he himself would lay his sword upon the table as a hint to would-be brawlers. It was in the midst of some such feasting as this that our bridegroom was suddenly seized with a violent illness, the cause or true nature of which the doctors of the day could not ascertain. At the time, some averred that he had had the evil eye cast upon him by one of the guests; some, that it was a bit of special spite of the devil against so good a man; while yet others thought it was his old malady returned. Whatever it may have been, we know that it hung about him for some twenty years, visiting him with frequent acute spasms of pain. Now, though God did not during all those years remove this thorn in the flesh, He did give him His grace to triumph over his two enemies, the Dane and the devil, in spite thereof.

Alfred is now twenty years of age, so, having seen him duly married, we may fairly consider him a complete man and close the chapter.

CHAPTER IV

The Armour of Faith and the Armour of Steel

I HAVE more than once referred to the Danes. Now, who were these Danes—these Vikings as they were contemptuously called ?* Well, they were of much the same stock as the Angles and Saxons, whose territories they were now harassing. Both were parts of that great Aryan tide which flowed across Central and Northern Europe in the earlier centuries of our era. The Angles and the Saxons had been the earlier waves thereof; the Danes formed a later one. They settled down chiefly in Denmark and Scandinavia, where their descendants dwell to-day. But as a race they had not yet sowed their wild oats, being of that restless, roving disposition, which reckons fighting as the best of all pastimes. Of course, they were still pagans. Their Kings were their leaders in war, and for a King not to be foremost in the fight was dishonourable, as it was for his intimates and chief followers to

* From 'vik,' a creek. Hence creek-lurkers or thieves.

survive him unless triumphant. Cruel they were and callous as to blood-shedding. A dying hero must have heroes to attend him on the journey to Valhalla ; so, when a King or Yarl fell, needs must that many a brave man must fall too. Pirates you may call them, and, indeed, that was the *mildest* name which the respectabilities of England and the Frankish kingdoms did call them ; but they had the making of a nation in them. In the Ninth century they think it beneath man's dignity to earn by patient toil from the soil what they can more quickly gain by the sword ; but in the Nineteenth they will take delight in agriculture, and be a quiet, industrious folk. In the former they sent us Ragnar Lodbrog, Guthrum and Sweyn to ravage and slay and burn ; but in the latter they have sent us Alexandra, our beloved Princess and Queen, to win our hearts, elevate our tastes, and purify our society.

They worshipped, in a strange rough way, Thor the thunderer ; Balder the beautiful, who when in the flesh was slain by an arrow of mistletoe, the only creature that had power to harm him ; Freya, the goddess of fertility, and many another ; but chiefly they adored Woden, a demigod—the Northern Hercules—whom they claimed as their ancestor, in common with the Saxons.

I must not dwell on their history here. Suffice to say that they were a terrible people to have as

enemies. Looking upon war as a calling and the world as their harvest-field, they reaped—with their swords—where they sowed not. Twice had they been in Southern England during Alfred's childhood,* but it appears that Alfred came not into contact with them. As a child he may well have been within sound of the conflict, but since that date the only blows he had seen given, as far as we know, were those given in mimic fight or in the hunting-field. But now the time was come for him to show what stuff he was made of. Think you his many conflicts with the Evil One, and his overcoming the enemy of souls, will have fitted him to fight the enemy of his country; or will his psalm-singing and his devotional exercises have rendered him dreamy, moony, unpractical? We shall soon see.

In 866 a swarm of pagans had arrived in a large fleet off the East Anglian coast. East Anglia was what we now call Norfolk and Suffolk. According to their own sagas, or songs, these Vikings came to avenge the death of one of their favourite heroes, Ragnar Lodbrog, who, they say, was killed by treachery. But as these sagas give several different localities, some in Northumbria, some in Anglia, as the place of his death, and also varying modes

* This is a word which signifies, as Mr. Thomas Hughes tells us, the period between boyhood and manhood. Its literal meaning is 'service-age'—*i.e.*, the time when the lad served in the household.

as to how he met it, it is impossible to say how much truth there is in any of them. The probabilities are that the daring Ragnar, on piracy bent, met with more than his match *somewhere*, and that his tribesmen and admirers, when they found he was gone, came down to England to get what satisfaction they could by slaughtering hundreds to attend him—though rather late—in his journey to the shades, and to collect compensation. This army, which soon became mainly composed of cavalry, worried and harried the northern and eastern parts of England for the next two years, a great part of which they converted into a desert. In 868, the year of Alfred's marriage, they lay at York during the early months, but in the autumn they marched south into the kingdom of Mercia, advancing as far as Nottingham. On their approach Burhred, the Mercian King, sent messengers to his overlord, Æthelred, entreating his aid against the pagans. Æthelred, with Alfred as his lieutenant, assembled a large army and marched north. But the Danes did not accept the challenge to come out and fight just then; and, as they were within a well-entrenched and walled camp of great strength, the Saxon army cared not to risk an attack, and sat down before the place. After a while Æthelred and the Danish leaders came to terms—we know not what they were—and the Wessex men returned home, leaving the Danes to winter there. This, probably, was

Alfred's first campaign, but we possess no record of his personal share or behaviour therein.

Now, the early part of the year 869 was a time of dire distress in the land, especially in Mercia. Famine and its common attendant, pestilence, were heavy on the land. The Danes, more afraid of these enemies than of the Angles, galloped back to York, and there passed the winter.

But in the spring of 870 one part of the 'army' (*i.e.*, the Danish army) take to their ships, and, sailing down the Humber, land on the Lincolnshire coast, and sack and burn the monastery of Bardeney. For this they are promptly chastised by Algar, Alderman of the shire, and suffer heavy loss. But as they retire, closely followed by the men of Lincoln, there suddenly appears the other and larger part of the heathen army, which has marched overland from York. The Alderman has now arrayed against him five kings and as many yarls. Another battle is fought. Stern and terrible was the struggle, but in the end the Christians were defeated, or, rather, to speak accurately, annihilated. As an immediate sequel to this, the rich and important Abbey of Croyland is pillaged and burnt to the ground, ere, alas! its relics and treasures can be carried away to hiding-places in the woods and fens. The vills of Medeshamsted (*i.e.*, Peterborough), Huntingdon, and Ely, in succession share a like fate. That portion of Mercia comprised in what is now

Huntingdonshire and the northern halves of Northamptonshire and Cambridgeshire was so harried, we are told, that scarce a man, woman or child remained to haunt their ruined homes. From Ely the heathen host turn towards the rising sun up the valley of the Little Ouse, and pitch their camp at Thetford. The King of East Anglia, Edmund of pious memory, a just ruler and beloved of his folk, but wanting in all military qualities save bravery, gathers his people around him and gives battle to the heathen near the site of the village of Hoxne. After a desperate conflict the Anglian army is defeated, routed, utterly destroyed. Edmund is taken prisoner, and the idolaters strive to make him renounce the Christ. Doubtless did Edmund wonder, as have thousands of followers of the Crucified One before and since his time, why the Almighty was dealing so hardly with His people, and allowing the heathen so to rage and imagine vain things about His inability to defend His own. But the King was faithful. He would trust Him though he were slain. Firmly he refuses the demands of Guthrum and his allies ; thereupon they tie him to a tree, torture, mock, and at last slowly shoot him to death with arrows, as may be seen in oaken effigy on many a rood-screen in Norfolk and Suffolk even to-day. His severed head was carried about as a trophy, while his body they left to the wolves and crows. Then his murderers glutted themselves with blood

and rapine, so that in a week or so every town and manor-house, church and abbey, cottage and byre, belonging to the North and South folk was destroyed, and such people as were able to escape fled to the great woods, and there lived as best they could.

But a monk or two and a few faithful cheorls, creeping from their hiding-places, gathered up the fragments of King Edmund, and even regained his head—or some other head. They embalmed it with sweet spices, anointing it for burial, and consecrating it with prayers and psalms, with holy-water and oil. They made so great moan that their lamentations ere long were heard by Æthelred at Winchester, and in a little while longer even Rome was aware of them. Thereupon the Pope and his Cardinal Bishops canonized the slain Edmund as a martyr, and henceforth he became known on earth as a saint. Meanwhile his faithful friends had buried his body—secretly at first—in the place called, from the event, Bury St. Edmunds.

During the almost arctic winter that followed, the sufferings of the houseless Anglians must have been terrible. The Danes kept within their camp at Thetford, living at ease on their spoils; while the Wessex King and his brother Alfred were taking counsel, and getting ready to face the now inevitable advent of the heathen on their borders. Cannot we picture to ourselves the fireside talk that winter and the fireside tasks? Cheorls in their huts, as they

made themselves new bows of ash and a new sheaf of arrows, would speak as cheerily as they could to their wives and children, assuring them that the wretched pagans would never be able to treat the Wessex men as they had the Mercian and East Anglian ones ; but none the less would they carefully direct the women folk where to betake themselves should the Danes by any means get near them. Thegns and aldermen would be counting up their men, and seeing to it that they were well armed. Smiths would be busy a-making of swords and axes and armour ; while monks would be busy at Masses and in preparing caches for their vessels and their relics in case of need. Some would boast, some would tremble ; some talk with stern resolution, some with exultant hope ; some with pious trust in the God of Battles, some with an ill-suppressed, sickening dread of the near future. And so the great cold passed.

As soon as the frost had broken, news reached Æthelwulf, Alderman of Berkshire, from his fellow-officer in Kent, that Danish galleys are in the Thames estuary. Almost simultaneously, footsore and breathless, messengers arrived from Hertfordshire with the evil news that a great host of horsemen were travelling towards the Thames. Æthelwulf sends word post haste to the King, who appears to have been in the West somewhere, and at once calls his shire thegns and their cheorls to his side. They come promptly and stand by, ready to face the foe in the

name of God and the King. Nor have they long to wait. The vanguard of the heathen host, passing by London, seize on a strong position on a peninsula formed by the confluence of the Kennet and the Thames. Whether they took the town of Reading—already in existence, be it noted—or not, we cannot say, nor do we know whether it was a burg or an open vill at that date. What we do know is that they made themselves a very strong camp on the position indicated, a site now occupied by the Reading racecourse. In three days they were ready to throw out a strong force under two yarls upon a foraging expedition. At Englefield, six miles west of Reading, the Alderman meets them, and, though his men number fewer than the Danes, he leads them to the attack, crying, ‘They be more than we, but our Captain Christ is braver than they!’ His faith was rewarded. The invaders were driven back with great slaughter to their camp, with the loss of one of the leaders. First blood for the Wessex men!

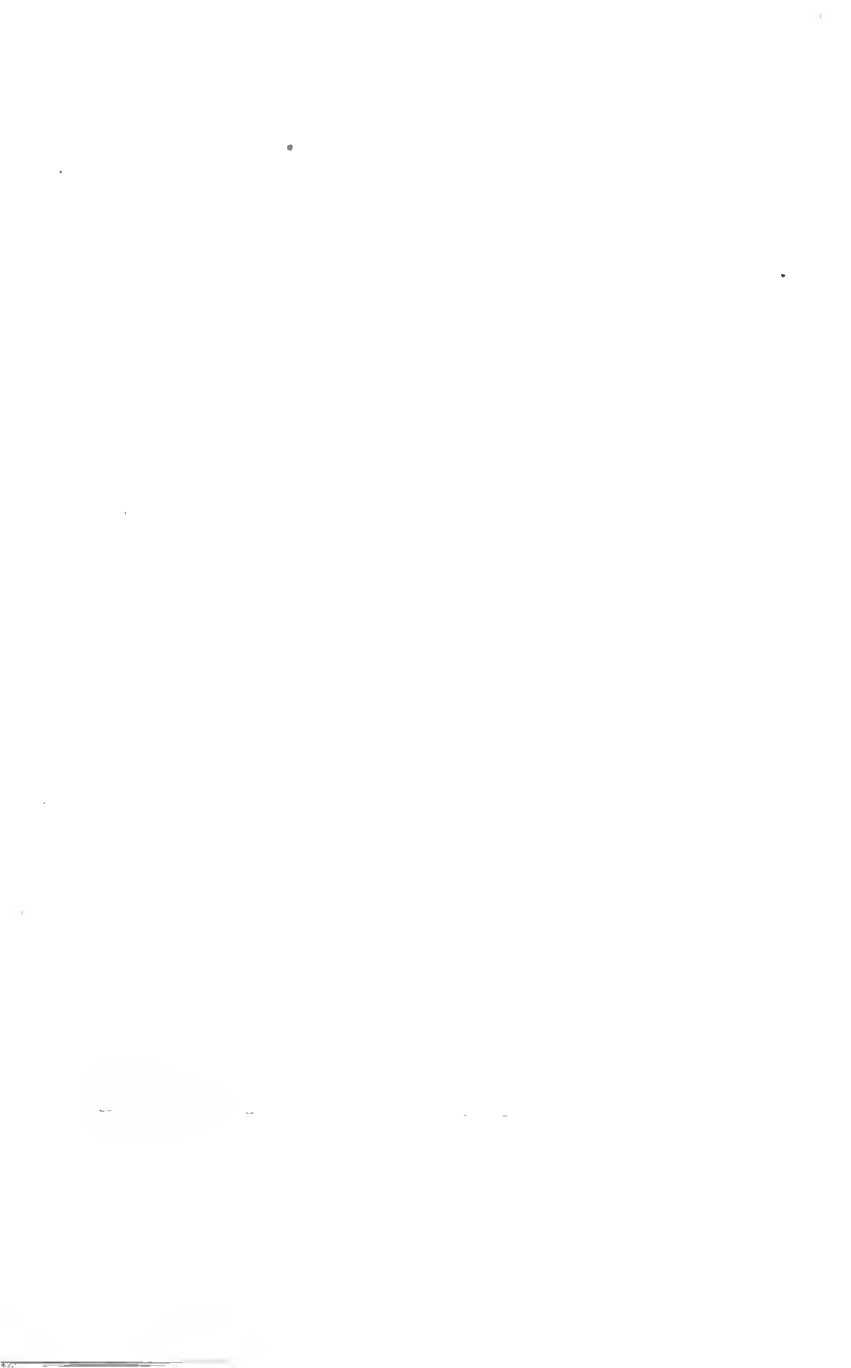
Four days later, with—if we may judge—more valour than discretion, the King and his brother made a swoop at the Reading camp. A large force that was outside the trenches was cut to pieces, but ere the English on their side could make trench or stockade, the whole pagan host under three kings and four yarls swarmed out from their camp like wasps from a nest. All day long the fight goes on.

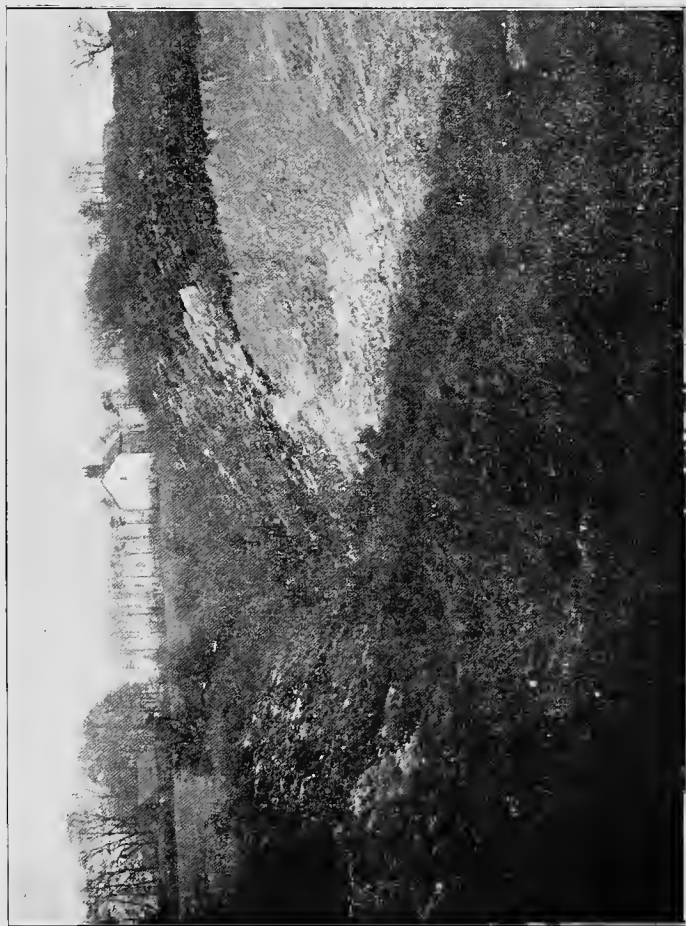
The fertile meadows have an abundant dressing of blood. Where to-day gardeners tend their crops and bakers bake their biscuits, men, that spring day, fought foot to foot and hand to hand as desperately as just a thousand years later German and Frenchman were fighting around Paris. As evening closed the weight of numbers told, and the English were obliged to give way. The King retired, apparently unmolested ; but, alas ! he had to leave behind all that was left of the brave Æthelwulf, whose body, so the chronicler says, the Danes dragged about Southern Mercia and Essex for weeks in derisive triumph.

Æthelred and Alfred fall back along the river, till, striking the chalk ridge which runs from Goring to Swindon, they take to the high ground. Passing Alfred's birthplace, and probably receiving recruits as they go, on the fourth day they turn at bay, for the pagan army in two divisions are close upon their heels. The English are also divided into two corps, whereof the King commands one and our Atheling the other. Now, the brothers were both religious men, but diversely so. The King, Asser tells us, was hearing Mass when the Danes commenced a combined attack on Alfred's position. The younger brother, who had read his prayers and sung his psalms from his own bosom-book earlier in the morning, put his men in battle array, and sent round to the King for help ; but the latter would not come to the fight till Mass was finished. So while

he stayed watching the performance before the altar, Alfred had to bear the weight of the attack alone. Presently he took the offensive, and led his men up the slope 'with the rush of a wild-boar,' for somehow or other the Danes had got the higher ground. His men were formed into a dense phalanx after the Roman manner, with their shields held edge to edge in a testudo or wall. He gained ground, actually forcing the enemy up the hill. Then when Mass was done came the King, and the fight became general. Now, on the slope of that chalk ridge, yclept Ascedune, *i.e.*, Ashdown, there grew a single stunted hawthorn-tree. That tree long stood for a witness of English bravery and prowess, for around it, as a rallying-point, the fight was fiercest. There for many hours men thrust and parried, slashed and fended, struggled and stumbled upon the slippery grass and chalk, made more slippery by the warm red blood that drenched the ground. In the end victory crowned the English arms. The Danes retreated hastily to their camp at Reading, leaving five yarls, one king, and a vast number of their followers dead upon the turf.

But the Danes, as are cockroaches in some houses, were hard to get rid of. It seemed to those Saxons there in Berkshire that, if you killed one, ten came to the funeral; for no sooner was this fight won than a fleet of long ships came rowing up the Thames crammed full of fresh pagans. The supply seemed





WINKLEBURY CAMP, BASING, AT THE PRESENT DAY.

(By kind permission of Messrs. Dowsett, Knight, and Co., Lincoln's Inn Fields.) To face p. 51.

inexhaustible. These ships—‘ascs’ they called them—managed to get up as far as Reading. How different the Thames channel must have been in their day from ours! The newcomers land, and further strengthen the camp. Soon they sally out and march south. At Basing they met the English, who had thrown themselves into Winklebury—even then an ancient fortification. But the English had not—then at least—learnt patience, nor the true value of trenches. They come out from their camp and give battle to the Danes in an open space (still shown at Old Basing), and alas! are defeated. Again, at some place named Merton by the chroniclers, the two armies meet. Here at first the defenders of their hearths and homes had the advantage, and then the tide of battle changed, and the Danes were left in possession ‘of the place of death,’ as the records significantly express it. The loss on both sides was terrible. On that of the English Headmund (Edmund), Bishop of Sherborne, was slain, and the King probably mortally wounded, since he died within a few days of the battle. The Danes were evidently too weakened to follow up their advantage, since Alfred was permitted without molestation to carry his brother’s body to Wimborne, and with all regal honours to bury it in the minster there.

CHAPTER V

A Hurricane from the North-West

ALFRED was now twenty-three years of age. As he stood by the side of the open tomb of Æthelred, his last living brother, he had need of all those assurances of Divine protection which the inspired authors of the volume in his bosom vouchsafe to those who serve God. Save his wife, he had no intimate now to look to, except Him that sticketh closer than a brother; and yet, surely, if ever man wanted the advice, comfort, and co-operation of trusted friends, it was this young King.

Think of the situation. Northumbria, East Anglia, a good part of Mercia and of Essex, were in the hands of the heathen, who had converted many a fair shire into a desolate wilderness. Convents and minsters, churches and halls, in ruins by the score, and cottages by the thousand, while their former occupants lay foully slain, or wandered as vagrants on the face of the land. But, worst of all, the heathen host, strong and mighty, was firmly



THE 'WALLS,' WHICH ALFRED MUST HAVE OFTEN GAZED AT.
(By permission of the Committee of the 'Wareham Pictorial Guide'.)

ensconced within his own borders. What good all their mighty strivings? What advantage their desperate valour? What gain their victory at Ashdown and the lesser ones elsewhere? The pagan, that hundred-headed Hydra, grew but stronger by defeat, while his own forces were terribly diminished, and his best leaders, so far as he knew, were slain. He might well have lost faith; but love suffereth long, and, while it beareth all things, hopeth all things. Alfred loved his God and his people. His heart bled for the one and yearned for the other. In his book he read, 'I will never leave thee nor forsake thee,' so he took fresh courage and strengthened himself in the promise.

There was no questioning of Alfred's succession to the throne; no one thought of proposing any other. If Alfred could not save them, then no man could. The Witan did not even assemble. Had not the matter been settled long before?

Guthrum and Hinguar, the chief Danish Kings, lay in the camp at Reading, but their bands had sacked all the towns and minsters for many miles around. 'The land,' says one writer of the time, 'was as the Garden of Eden *before* them, and *behind* the desolate wilderness.' London, most of Berkshire, of Surrey, of Kent, and a slice of Hampshire, were overrun and pillaged. Alfred, from his station among the Dorsætas, sent out a summons to the Aldermen of the four Western shires to come to him

with all their available forces. When assembled he marches eastward. Out on the Wiltshire downs at Wilton the two armies meet. The Saxon Chronicle tells us that the battle was precipitated by the enthusiasm of Alfred's soldiers. Long time it raged, and the issue seemed doubtful till the English fell into that old, old trap, a feigned retreat. Pursuing where no flight was, they found themselves hemmed in by the solid wings of the heathen army. There was a fearful loss on both sides; but the net result was that the invaders were again left in possession of the 'place of death.'

This was the ninth pitched battle that year south of the Thames, and both sides seemed to have had enough for awhile, as well they might. A few weeks later we read of a treaty of peace being made between Alfred and Guthrum, whereby the latter promised to withdraw to the north of the Thames; but he was allowed to keep his spoil. Guthrum, by his willingness for the first time to come to terms, showed a brave man's respect for a brave man. Alas! his word was not so trusty as his sword, or else he was unable to control his followers and allies, since the peace was not long kept. But at least the Danes had learnt something from the Saxons, for after this we find them always waiting for Alfred to attack them, and not they him.

Well, 'the army' quits Reading and marches into

Hertfordshire and winters there. In the spring came Buhred, King of Mercia and Alfred's brother-in-law, and weakly purchased for money some kind of treaty. Thereupon the Danes march through Mercia into Lincolnshire—now quite their own territory—and we see no more of them in Wessex until 876, thus giving to that kingdom five years' rest.

How were these years spent? The chronicles tell us little, for seemingly then, as since, wars and battles were thought to be the peculiar matter for history. Neither does Asser help us much, since, though he tells us a great deal as to what his patron did for education, for religion, for administration of justice, yet he gives no clue, or very uncertain ones, as to when these good works were done. So we will follow the example of writers old and new, and first have done with the Danish question, or at least its first phase, ere we turn to deal with those peaceful and blessingful acts of Alfred upon which his title of Great more depends than upon his bravery and military prowess. We may remark, however, that we are sure that, with that indefatigable energy which all agree he possessed, and in spite of those almost daily attacks of pain to which *his* thorn in the flesh subjected him, he was busy early and late setting his kingdom in order and in preparing himself and people for the unknown but threatening future.

To resume. In spite of treaties, we find Guthrum and company again devastating Northern Mercia in 874. It will be remembered that Alfred's sister Ethelswitha was married to the King of that part of England. Well, one fine day Alfred is surprised by a visit from his sister, who comes to him without any following worthy of a Queen. Evidently she has bad news to tell. Her husband had run away from his kingdom without striking a blow! He had got aboard a ship at the nearest port, and had gone across to France *en route* for Rome. There, to finish his story, he died almost immediately upon his arrival.

His sister's information confirms Alfred's previous conviction that he must be up and doing. He remarks with what ease the heathen attack different points by means of their ships. He remembers how his own people had once been as good sailors as these Vikings. Why not make them so again? Why not keep the enemy at arm's length? In the Ninth century Alfred had hit upon the principle that we in the Nineteenth adopted. He goes to work. He builds ships, mans them, becomes their Admiral. Danish ascs infest the narrow seas. He meets seven of them together. They fight, of course. He captures one of them, and the rest make off. There you have the first English naval victory. The ships of 875 did not much resemble those of to-day. Probably they did not measure a





PART OF THE 'WALLS, WAREHAM, FROM THE RIVER PUDDLE. (When the Danes held them they would have been crowned by a stockade.)

(By permission of the 'Wareham Pictorial Guide'.)

hundred tons; but for that age, we are told, they were large, having a double row of oars as well as sails.

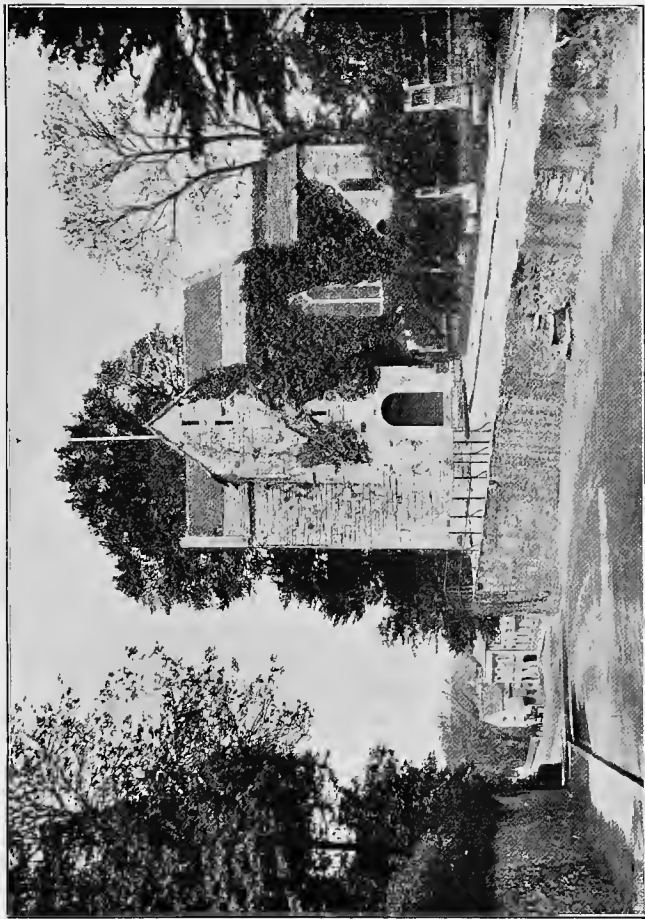
The winter of 875-6 was passed by the great Danish army at Grantabridge, as Cambridge was then called. From the manner they had treated his vassal's kingdom and treaty, Alfred judged that he need expect small consideration if the heathens thought themselves strong enough to attack him. Minstrels and others reported they were as sandhoppers on the shore for number, and as wolves for blood-thirst. In the spring his spies inform him that Guthrum and his host had marched to the Wash, and had taken to their ships, a vast fleet. We know not where Alfred's vessels were, for, of course, they could not oppose such overwhelming numbers. No God-sent hurricane scattered this armada. They pass through the Straits and down Channel to the mouth of the Frome in Dorset. Here at Wareham was—and is to-day—a Saxon fortified camp nearly surrounded by water. By a sudden attack the Danes seize and proceed to strengthen it as a base of operations. They soon send out marauding expeditions. Alfred is upon these quickly with horse and foot, whereupon they promptly retire, and the King sits him down before their stronghold. The Danes do not seem anxious to come out, and Alfred, now wiser than of yore, will not assault the place. After a time negotiations are opened and a new

treaty drawn up. Great ceremony is used to make the oaths on either side binding. On that of the English, the holy relics from several shrines are brought; while on that of the Danes their sacred rings—or, rather, bracelets—smeared with blood, are placed on Woden's altar. The invaders took the most solemn oath to quit Alfred's country and hand over hostages. Alfred, trusting them, withdrew the bulk of his forces, merely leaving a body of horse to see that they duly departed.

It may have been weak of Alfred to trust them a second time, but honest men are prone to allow for honesty in others, and our King had a wonderful belief in human nature, in spite of adverse experiences.

One night, regardless of oath and hostages, the pagans steal out of camp, surprise and kill the English horsemen, seize the animals, and by their help they march rapidly westward, leaving a sufficient garrison at Wareham to hold the place. They reach and seize Exancastra (*i.e.*, Exeter) ere Alfred can overtake them. Here the perjured ruffians make themselves safe, and snugly settle down for the winter in Northern-haye Castle.

As soon as Alfred had gathered his forces next spring, after their usual winter dispersion to their homes, he marched to Exeter, and beleaguered it on the land side. But the wily Dane would not come out of his hole, preferring the waiting game.



ST. MARTIN'S, WAREHAM. (The body of the church is Saxon work of the ninth century. The road shown is cut through the 'Walls.' Alfred must often have gazed at this during the siege.)

(By permission of the Committee of the 'Wareham Pictorial Guide'.)

To face p. 53.



Harvest-time, he knew, would send most of the English off to gather in their corn, since famine was a worse foe than Norsemen, and our island was then self-supported as to food.

Now, although the pagans hold the river—for the Exe was then navigable up to the 'ever faithful city'—supplies begin to run short in their camp. So word is sent round by Guthrum to Wareham that the camp there be broken up and all its stores be brought to Exeter in the fleet. A hundred and twenty ascs are freighted and set sail, but winds are contrary. Alfred hears of this move, and sends his own little fleet to meet the Danish one. He goes not himself, however, for fear the enemy should slip out and devastate the fair land of the Devanas. His ships are partly manned by Danes—a dangerous experiment, perhaps, but it answers. Part of the enemy's fleet are met with and defeated, while upon the greater part 'God blew them with His winds and scattered them.' About a hundred of them were driven ashore at Swanwich (*i.e.*, Swanage, in Dorset) and totally wrecked.

This decided the siege of Exeter. Probably both Alfred and Guthrum had a certain wholesome fear of each other, and cared not to take the offensive. So once more negotiations are opened, oaths again taken and hostages given by Guthrum, and he is allowed to march out. This time, either for his word's sake or because he needs must, he quietly

crosses East Devon and Somerset; then, passing the Avon by one of the lower fords, he enters Glostershire, where he makes Ceolwulf, his puppet in Mercia, provide for his wintering. Here they build for themselves huts, and some actually settle down on the land to which they help themselves.

CHAPTER VI

A Tidal Wave

WE now come to the saddest part of Alfred's life. In the early part of the year 878 he was indeed under a dark cloud, which, too, hung over all his kingdom; but it was not without its silver lining. The time of severe trial was a time for proving faith and proving friends, a time for thought and meditation, a time of physical rest. Above all, perhaps, was it a time wherein Alfred learnt the 'sweet uses of adversity' in extended sympathy with those who lived in less affluence than he, so that he might more readily be touched with the feeling of his subjects' infirmities.

It is difficult to satisfactorily account for the disastrous state of Wessex for those few months during which it was completely disorganized. We can well believe, however, that the continued strain was more than it could bear. Youths grew not up quickly enough to fill the constantly thinned ranks, whereas the Danes were continually reinforced from - - - - - oversea, a seemingly inexhaustible source of supply. Yet, says Mr. Freeman, 'one hardly sees how it was that the country could be *all at once* so utterly over-

run, especially as there is no mention made of any battle.'

It has been suggested that the collapse was by reason of the estrangement of the Thegns of Wessex from their loyalty and their neglect of orders, on account of the high-handedness of the King. Mr. Freeman and Mr. Thomas Hughes agree in thinking this most unlikely, as does the writer. But in fairness I mention that there is a tale told in a certain manuscript edition of Asser's *Life* which relates how that Alfred's cousin Neot (the Cornish saint, after whom the parish near Liskeard is named) came, as a prophet of God, to rebuke him for oppressing the people and doing unworthily as a Christian ruler ; announcing that the disasters and disgrace he was about to endure were sent by the Almighty to turn his proud heart into the ways of righteousness. All I need say of this by way of criticism is, that it is undoubtedly a forgery, an interpolation, of a much later date than Asser's writings. On the whole, the position in January, 878, is accounted for by three co-operating factors : the exhaustion of the country ; the arrival of fresh hordes under Hubba, son of Ragnar Lodbrog, with the renowned Raven banner—a power in itself ; and the complete unexpectedness of the attack.

Whether Guthrum honestly tried to restrain his allies and followers, we cannot say. This we know—that just after Twelfth Night the Danes at Gloster broke up their camp and stole away to Chippenham,

while Hubba, who had been pretending to winter in South Wales, crossed the channel in thirty war-ships and fell upon the North Devon coast. The double blow, delivered in mid-winter, paralyzed the country, and no effort seems to have been made to resist. All Wiltshire is overrun, and many of its people escape to France ; the fairer parts of Devonshire are devastated, while of the eastern end of the kingdom we hear absolutely nothing.*

Now, at that time the country that stretched away westward from Wiltshire for about thirty miles into Somerset, in a track some twenty miles broad, was a wild, uncultivated land, known as Sel-wood. A good deal of this was—and still is—swampy ground. Moors they are now locally called. Elsewhere it was thick, tangled woodland. It was into this wilderness that Alfred, finding himself without troops and hard pressed, retired, as to a sanctuary.

Alfred resembles David in many respects. In this experience of his we see a parallel—imperfect, perhaps

* Though unable to prove my case, I am strongly of opinion that at this time the Eastern shires had their hands full also. There *is* evidence that Hasten (or Hastings), another dangerous Viking, was round about Fulham the year after this; but the chronicles are confessedly inexact as to date. My theory then is that, either by preconcerted arrangement or by coincidence, Hasten attacked the valley of the Thames *this year* at the same time as Guthrum and Hubba attacked the Western country, and that the sudden triple blow caused a complete panic among the people, and, for the time, even paralyzed the military machinery. This alone seems to account for no mention being made of the aldermen of the Eastern shires and their forces.

—between the son of Jesse hiding in caves from Saul, and the son of Æthelwulf hiding in the woods from Guthrum. Both loved God ; but both were men. Both acknowledge in their writings the constant presence of the Evil One ; and, although we get no direct act of sin exhibited in Alfred's case for the public gaze, it may well be that adversity and privation were needful for the spiritual education of each of them. Alfred in Sel-wood had naught left to rule over save his own self—nothing to trust in save God.

Naturally, where history fails, romance steps in. It did so in my first chapter. It does so here ; only this time it is a veritable graybeard of romance. Perhaps I need hardly tell the story of the cakes—it is so well known. Yet how can I tell of Alfred and leave out the cakes ? Impossible ! So, then, here it is :

When the King sought refuge in Sel-wood he found shelter in the hut of a swineherd. The man knew his guest's rank and importance, but his wife did not. One day the good housewife put some cakes to bake upon the hearthstone, and, being busy about other work, bade her guest, who sat by mending his bow, and doubtless scheming how to mend his fortunes, to watch and turn the cakes when necessary. When she came back the cakes were burnt. Thereupon, to quote a Somersetshire edition of the original Latin ballad, she cried out in shrill tones of reproach and anger :

‘Ca’sn thee mind the ke-aks, man, an’ doossen zee ’em burn ?
I’m bound thee’s eat ’em vast enough, az zoon uz ’tiz the turn.’

It is also said that this minder of pigs was a very wise man, though so lowly in rank, and that Alfred, perceiving this, made him afterwards Bishop of Winchester. But the story seems most improbable, since Denewulf, the man's name according to the legend, became Bishop next year—a promotion under the circumstances too rapid for credence. Most likely it was the invention of mediæval minstrels, agreeably to their common, favourite sentiment of surprise promotions, such as the Cinderella and King Cophetua romances exhibit.

There is also the pretty tale of the King getting himself up as a harper and gaining entrance thereby to Guthrum's camp; how he was entertained by the Danes, and stayed there many days until he had gained all the knowledge he wanted to help him when he should again take the field. This incident is told only by the later chronicles—so called—and must not be considered trustworthy, however interesting. His musical skill would have enabled him to play the skald, but his conscience, methinks, would not have allowed him to play the spy.

Now, it seems probable that Alfred was not quite deserted in the wilderness, but that from the first he had a small band of faithful followers with him. Saying which we resume history, always considering the Saxon Chronicle as the pre-eminent authority.

When Hubba the Viking landed at Appledore in North Devon in January, 878, Odda, the Alderman of the shire, deeming it useless to oppose the heathen

in the open, threw himself with a few faithful thegns and their men into a fort called Cynnith, near by Northam on the Taw. Saxon earthworks, even plus stockades, were not very secure places; but when they had watchful, brave men inside, they were not recklessly to be stormed. So Hubba thought when he arrived before Cynnith; for even with the magic Raven banner to help him he declined the assault. Now, the weakness of the place lay in that it contained no supply of water—a fact which, it may be presumed, the Dane also knew; so he thought that his Raven might contentedly wait for its feast, since men, however brave, cannot long live without drinking. Now, it may be that, elated with success and rejoicing over the spoil collected from the fair valleys of Devon, the Danes had given their minds to festivity. Perhaps, too, they had indulged too freely in native cider, the which is a bad thing for those who have to stand firmly. At any rate, one morning at daybreak Odda came out to them, but not to surrender by any means. So sudden was the onslaught that we may almost say of the foreigners—to quote a certain paradoxical text—‘when they arose in the morning they were all dead men.’ A local tradition relates that Hubba, unable to rally his panic-stricken followers, and disdaining to fly, stood his ground at a spot still known as Bloody Corner. To him came Odda, and there, within sound of the Atlantic surge, surrounded by a ring of watchful men of Devon, and by heaps of dead Danes, the two



ATHELNEY 'ISLAND,' WITH ALFRED MEMORIAL IN FOREGROUND. (The mound in mid-distance, with a ruined church on its summit, is suggestively called the Mump.)

(From a drawing by J. G. James. For his kind permission.)

champions engaged in single combat. Mighty was the set-to. Hubba had the longer sword, but Odda the quicker eye, and so—the Yarl departed for the Shades well attended by his friends! The Raven, indeed, had abundance of carrion whereon to feed that morning, only it was the carcasses of his late owners, for, beside Hubba, eight hundred and forty men (one account says twelve hundred) lay dead around. It was but a remnant that escaped to their ships.

Now, when this glorious news reaches Alfred he sees in it a token for good. He taketh counsel with Æthelnoth, Alderman of Somerset, and they decide that the time has come for action. With the anniversary of the Resurrection comes a resurrection of hope to them. Secret messengers are despatched to ascertain what faithful men remain within the kingdom. Meanwhile, they betake themselves to a certain isolated hill or mound on the western edge of Sel-wood, a place surrounded by a dangerous swamp formed by the rivers Thone and Parret, and there make a fortified camp, into which all the Somerset men gather. They called it Ætheling's-eig (*i.e.*, Prince's isle), now corrupted into Athelney. A good view of this old stronghold is obtained by travellers of to-day as they go by rail from Taunton to Yeovil. It is only an island now at exceptionally wet times. From this safe retreat the King's men would sally out to attack foraging parties of Danes or to obtain food for themselves. Thus passed seven

or eight weeks, tediously enough, since recruits did not—probably could not—come in very fast. A tale is told of this period by William of Malmesbury, which, if untrustworthy as history, is valuable as supplying a charming picture of the man and his environment.

One day, we are told, while the waters were yet frozen, the King's people had gone out to get fish, flesh, or fowl to sustain themselves withal. While they were gone, Alfred was reading the Psalms of David from out his own bosom manual, when a poor man appeared at the door and begged a morsel of bread for Christ His sake. Whereupon the King called to his mother-in-law within the hut to get the stranger food. She replied there was but one loaf and a little wine in a pitcher for the household supper. Alfred bade her give the man a portion of both, which she reluctantly did. As soon as he had been served the stranger was seen no more ; but, lo ! the loaf remained whole and the pitcher full. Meanwhile the King fell asleep and dreamt that St. Cuthbert of Lindisfarne stood by him and told him it was he who had come abegging. He said that God had pitied his afflictions and those of his people, and would restore him to prosperity ; in token whereof his people should return that day with great store of fishes. On awaking he told the dream to Edburgha, and lo ! as they talked the men came back bringing fish enough to feed an army.

CHAPTER VII

‘My Faithful Followers, lo! the Tide is spent’

TURNING from monkish legend—truthfully beautiful if not beautifully true—to the Chronicle, we read, modernizing somewhat : ‘On the seventh week after Easter, Alfred rode to Ecgbirtestan (Egbert’s stone) by the east of Sel-wood ; and there to meet him come the Sumorsætas, all the Wilsætas, and of Hamptonshire a deal that on this side of the sea was. And he fared one night from the wick (dwelling-place) to Æglea, and after that to Ethandune, and there fought with all the host (of the Danes), and put them to flight, and rode after them to their work (fort), and there sat fourteen nights. And the (pagan) army gave him hostages and mickle oaths, and eke they promised him that their King should receive baptism. And this they fulfilled. And three weeks after came Guthrum with thirty of his men that in the host were worthiest at Aller—that is, near Ætheling’s eig. And him Alfred received at his baptism (*i.e.*, stood sponsor for him), and his chrism loosing was at Wedmore.’

To explain a little. Alfred had made an appoint-

ment with the forces mentioned in the Chronicle (and possibly others) at the place which is now called Brixton. A local tradition says that the signal for the assembly was a bonfire on Stourton Hill, where Alfred's monument now stands. Such a beacon would have met the needs of the case, since, though it could have been seen in three counties, yet would it have been hidden from the Danes in their camp near Westbury. The gathering could not have been very large, but it was one of desperate and determined men. As soon as organized a little they marched to Æglea, now Clay Hill, where earthworks may still be seen. Here, by-the-by, monkish tradition says that St. Neot again appeared and assured Alfred that God had restored him to favour, and that on the morrow he should gloriously triumph. Ethandune is considered to be the modern Edington, seven miles north-east of Clay Hill.

We know not how many men fought at Ethandune, but, judging by effects, there can be little doubt that the main body of Guthrum's army was routed and driven back to his camp, now known as Bratton Castle. This camp, twenty acres in extent, was the last stronghold of Guthrum on Wessex soil. Near by, as many readers will know, there is a great white horse on the hillside, made by scouring the turf from the chalk escarpment. This is commonly supposed to be a memorial of the victory ; but the evidence is inconclusive.

Was there ever a greater transformation scene, a more complete inversion of power? Within four days from being the leader of a mere handful of men, hiding in inaccessible swamps—while his enemies, masters of his kingdom, lord it in the open—Alfred becomes once more the victorious King of the West Saxons, while his arrogant and ruthless opponents are prisoners within their own camp, suing for peace.

So, says one writer, Alfred's *luck* came back! So, say others, God restored him to favour. Now, I doubt if the writer who called it luck truly believes in any such thing; nor am I prepared to say that the previous overthrow was on account of the King's faults, nor this recovery the *direct* effect of his restoration to Divine favour. But this I do see in it: a step in the working out of the Divine purpose in the making of this our England—a purpose, peradventure, more promoted by Alfred's conduct subsequent to the victory than by the victory itself. For, see, the victory disarmed the Danes for a while; but the conversion of Guthrum to Christianity—strange sort of conversion as it was—was a tremendous stride towards civilizing the Danes; indeed, a large part of them from that time did settle down and dwelt peaceably in the land—became, in fact, Englishmen: for I would have you note that our carefully blended race contains much more Norse blood than is popularly supposed, and that its

infusion added to the strain a certain vigour of purpose and act at a time when there were signs of weakness in the stock.

But some will say, We cannot understand Alfred being so lenient with these thrice-perjured pirates and ruffians. It looks as if he were afraid of them!

Not so to me, at least. I wish my readers to see that, although Alfred was a brave soldier, a trusted leader, and a clever strategist, he yet possessed a higher quality than either of those in his essential goodness. Looking at his life as a whole, his laws and writings, his examples and precepts, I see a man who *first and foremost* aimed at lifting the nation to a higher level of life; a man who took Christianity seriously; a man who had the true missionary spirit, and desired that all men should come to the knowledge of the truth as he knew it. Thus I see good reason for his trusting Guthrum a fourth time, and for inducing him to receive baptism. Doubtless Alfred—tainted with that crude sacramentarianism that was already eating into the Church—thought that when once baptized the Danes would become good Christians and quiet neighbours. And, leaving the religious side of the question, was it not worth the while to attempt to make friends of the remaining Danes rather than to make corpses of them?

There is something strikingly dramatic in this scene of the savage, stern old pagan King and his thirty bearded warriors, who have left their camp

and followed Alfred into Somerset, kneeling before the cross. Imagine these heroes, who boasted descent from Woden, going down into the water and being there baptized in the name of Jesus Christ by a Saxon Bishop. Alfred, more elate, I doubt not, than after Ashdown or Ethandune, stands godfather for these rude, rough freebooters. Guthrum's Christian name is Athelstan. The white chrism cloth is bound about their heads, and there remains for eight days as a kind of novitiate's hood. At the expiration of that time it is solemnly removed by Æthelnoth, that all men may know them to be members of Christ's Church. 'Alleluia! Alleluia! Laus Deo!' I hear the monks and the nuns singing. I see Alfred the Hopeful smiling with pleasure, but some bearded old Saxons, with scarred faces, smile bitterly at the idea of pagans keeping their vows.

The very text of the two treaties made between Alfred and Guthrum is still extant. The shorter was the one made at Chippenham when the Danes surrendered; the longer was the definitive one drawn up at Wedmore after due conference. This latter was confirmed by the Wessex Witan in due course; but note that the Witan is now spoken of as that of the *English* nation. This document provides that the Danes should withdraw permanently beyond a line running up the north shore of the Thames estuary to the Lea, up that river to its source, thence to Bedford town, thence following the Ouse till Watling

Street is reached, and from there following that old Roman road across the Midlands to Chester. The other clauses concern the relations of Saxons and Danes while they may be in contact with one another, which may be summarized by the phrase that there was to be one law, and only one law, for English men and Danish men. The latter were allowed ample time to betake themselves to their reservation. . . A long halt was allowed them in Gloucestershire, where many of them had built houses. Some of these latter remained there and became direct subjects of Alfred. Where bargains became necessary between Danes and Mercians during the march of the former, hostages and 'warrantors' were to be given to insure due fulfilment. This clause clearly indicates that intertribal idea, existing among all Teutonic peoples, which lay at the base of early commerce—the principle of collective guarantee—which Alfred now discreetly impressed upon the Danes.

CHAPTER VIII

‘Peace bath her Victories’

ALFRED, having got rid of the Danes from among his people, at once set himself to other tasks, which, if less heroic, were more arduous, and required still more patience and skill. He had rewon to his sceptre the fairest part of England ; now he had to win it to social order, to successful industry, to mental advancement, and, above all, to spiritual enlightenment. But while these were undoubtedly the objects of his chief desires, yet, mindful of the past, he must also provide for the defence of the land against attacks in the future ; so that the reputed words of primitive men to Tubal Cain might well have been those of Englishmen to Alfred :

‘ So while
We thank thee for the plough,
We’ll not forget the sword.’

It has been said—and aptly so as regards ages past, at least—that happy is the country that hath no history ; and the truth of this political beatitude is

well illustrated by the fact that the events of the next ten or twelve years are summed up in the Saxon Chronicle in a few paragraphs. But for all that we are not left in the dark. The faithful biographer Asser tells us what the King was doing during these years ; also Alfred's own writings speak of the noble character and abounding quantity of his labours.

I shall not attempt to treat chronologically the doings of the years 880 to 892, but speak of them in their subjective relations. And first as to National Defence, a subject, alas ! which a thousand years later occupies still the foremost place in national politics.

Mindful of the advantage that the Danes had had on many occasions through their skill in fort-making, Alfred was careful to encourage his shire aldermen in teaching their thegns the art of fortification. Many forts he caused to be made at strategical points, while he moved from place to place as chief engineer. Many English towns whose names end in 'stock' probably received that affix at that time from the wooden stockade that surmounted the earthen rampart of their fort. Moreover, the King was zealous in bridge-building, that his soldiers, in time of need, should not be delayed by swollen rivers. But we find the King had often much cause for disheartenment, since those who should have earnestly seconded him, often, through supineness—a moral canker prevalent among Anglo-Saxons of that period—neglected their duties, preferring hunting to

work, to the great indignation of the King. Careful was he, too, to encourage excellence in smithery, that his people might not only have good tools wherewith to cultivate their lands, but better weapons with which to defend them.

Now, our observant and methodical King had observed during his earlier wars an uncertainty in regard to the number of men upon whom he could rely in answer to the call to arms. The old custom seems to have been that the King—who had no troops of his own save the cheorls of his private and royal manors—depended upon the aldermen and their thegns to assemble as many men as they could when called upon. But men at times were loath to respond, not from cowardice or want of loyalty, but on account of some matter of home work, such as sowing or reaping. And sometimes, when assembled, they would demand to be sent to their farms for some like reason—similarly as, it is said, the Boers in South Africa do now, a similarity which is not the only one existing between the English of that day and the Boers of ours. Noticing these things, and remembering, I suspect, King David's plan (1 Chron. xxvii.), Alfred ordained this arrangement: All the fighting men in each shire should be divided into three corps, whereof one should remain on duty night and day for a month, after which they should return to their land and be relieved by the second corps. This system of relief was maintained for nine months

in each year, the winter being holiday time for all. Then, again, of the corps on duty for the time, one section was told off for garrisoning the stockades, the remainder constituting a mobile force at the disposal of the King and his aldermen.

These details are given us by Asser, but it seems—to the modern mind, at least—that there must be some inaccuracy in them, since surely the withdrawal of a third of the effective manhood of the country from productive occupations for the nine best months in the year would be a strain too great to be long maintained ; besides, the King had scarce sufficient resources to feed such a large army, as we shall see later. The explanation may be that the respective third parts were *liable* for service for three specific months each year, and possibly served one out of the three.

The most important part, possibly, of Alfred's military policy was the building and maintaining of a fleet. This he had begun during the storm and stress of 875 ; now he carries out his ideas more fully, allotting so many ships to each haven, there to be built, maintained, and manned. As a result, a sea-fight takes place in 882 against a fleet of pirates, in which six of the latter are captured. It seems that at first he merely made vessels of the old Northern type, such as the one that has of late been unearthed from its grave ; but later we read that—

‘He built long ships against the ascs ; they were

nearly twice as long as the others. Some had sixty oars, some more. They were swifter and steadier, and eke higher than the others; they were neither on the Frisian shape nor on the Danish, but as he himself thought they useful might be.'

The mention of the word 'Frisian' reminds me, too, that Alfred enlisted many of the men of that nation—our first cousins by race and tongue—to help man his ships, the Frisians being then, as now, excellent sailors. Thus, a thousand years ago or so, Alfred the Great strove, and for a time successfully, at least, to gain the supremacy of the seas, a task which of late years, under Victoria the Good, has again been accomplished under such strangely different environment.

Alfred's energy and perseverance were directed also, concurrently with what we have been speaking of, to the restoration of the ruined burgs and cities, churches and abbeys, that formed such sad blots on the English landscape of the day, as well as to the erection of new minsters to the glory of God and the welfare of the Church, and of better dwelling-places for himself.

To take the last first. Do not imagine that his new house at Winchester—Wolsey Palace—resembled anything we conceive of by the latter word. It was not a Tuileries, nor even a Buckingham Palace, he constructed. But it was a substantial building of cut stone, well and truly laid according to the art

of foreign masons, whom he encouraged to come over the water from France and Rhineland. But, it may be objected, why did so good and utilitarian a monarch spend time and money upon palaces for himself? Be not hasty, O critic! The halls which he erected at Winchester and elsewhere became—did they not?—object lessons to his people, patterns for them to copy; and more—much more—than that, O carping Radical! these halls were in reality needful as resting-places for the King and his Court when he went on circuit, as he continually did, and thus became the sitting-places of the King's Bench and High Court of Appeal, where, not only did he examine reserved cases from the hundred and the shire motes, but where also he did consult with his royal officers, and instruct them in their duties and responsibilities, as saith Asser.

Alfred's first efforts in monastic architecture were that of an abbey for nuns at Shaftesbury, and one for monks at Athelney, and we can well, I hope, enter into those feelings which produced the resolve to erect the latter. Over the former he appointed his second daughter, Ethelgiva, as Abbess, endowing the foundation with much land and many gifts. It is said by William of Malmesbury that he also rebuilt and fortified the town of Shaftesbury as a protection to the abbey.

Among the cities which he restored and strengthened, London ranks first. Before this it had become

the chief trading centre of the island, though Winchester was the official centre, as it remained for centuries yet. But since its sack in 851 its defences, churches, and other buildings had been in ruins, and the site itself had become the camping-ground of rogues and vagabonds of all sorts. But in the year 886 Alfred proceeded there with a force of armed men, and, having ejected the disorderly crew he found in possession, set about rebuilding and fortifying the city, for which purpose he had enlisted a large number of outland masons and mechanics. Great expedition was used in this work, and when, in a year or two, its walls were complete, the King handed it over for custody to his son-in-law, Ethelred, whom he had appointed Alderman over all Saxon Mercia after Ethandune. To this restored London soon flocked merchants and craftsmen of many kindreds and tongues. It became a great emporium and workshop at once, and has remained so ever since ; but it has had its hard times. The Danes who came thither preferred, it seems, to dwell apart, and built for themselves a *virke*—*i.e.*, a strong place—on the south side of the river, as the name Southwark, originally Sud-Virke, testifies to this day ; while Tooley Street therein commemorates the name of the Norse patron saint, St. Olave ; while many another locality shows traces of Danish nomenclature.

During these same years Alfred was busy with

his pen and his paper, or, rather, sheepskin. He must have been a busy man indeed! He appears to have been his own Commander-in-Chief, Lord High Admiral, Chief Justice, Minister of Education, and Chief of the Public Works Department; and, besides all these, he was a diligent student and writer. He seems to have been, not jack, but King of all trades. Some think that he had not known Latin till this period, but that surely is an absurd theory, considering his youthful experiences. What he certainly did do at this time was to invite Latin scholars from abroad; but they came not to teach *him*, but *his scholars* in the royal schools which he established for the education of the thegns and the better education of the clergy; for, it must be told, the Churchmen, both lay and regular, at the beginning of his reign were deplorably ignorant. Very few could *read* a word of Latin, even if, parrot fashion, they could *repeat* certain offices; while Anglo-Saxon, as a written language, was still less known. It was one of Alfred's highest ambitions to make an English literature, and he did. He was not its founder, since that honour belongs to Cædmon, two centuries earlier; but Cædmon's diction and style was much more archaic than Alfred's. If Cædmon and his exalted 'Paraphrase' be the ultimate spring up among the summit mists, Alfred is certainly the mountain tarn from which flows the ever-widening river of English literature.

Alfred's English at first glance appears to the modern as a strange language, but with a little trouble his works can be read to-day by the ordinary reader, although a thousand years of change have rolled by. Among other works, he translated from the Latin—very freely editing and annotating it—the History of Beda, which contains what purports to be the history of Britain from the earliest times. The universal History of Orosius, the Pastorale of Gregory the Great, the 'Consolation of Philosophy,' by Boethius—a Roman Consul put to death by Theodoric the Goth—were other books he translated from the Latin. It is worthy of remark that the next great literature-promoting monarch upon the English throne—Queen Elizabeth—likewise translated the latter work, as, too, had Chaucer done in the interval. As Boethius had not been a Christian, Alfred thought it well to alter some of his (Boethius') opinions in translating, in order to conform them to Christian ethics. My readers must judge for themselves whether this was a moral act. But the one book that our King wrote that we would have valued above all others was his commonplace journal, in which he wrote down his observations and thoughts on passing events and current studies. But, alas! though it is spoken of by contemporary writers, it is *lost*! What a light it would have thrown on life a thousand years ago if it had only survived!

The Saxon Chronicle, too—so often referred to—was commenced under his directions by the monks of Canterbury, under Plegmund, the Archbishop. It has stood, and still stands, the most trustworthy of all Anglo-Saxon authorities. Its earlier part, dealing with back history, was, of course, written up from tradition and from Latin records. But from 891 to 1154 this posting-up of events was continued, by one monastery or another, approximately as they occurred. Dean Kitchen calls the Chronicle ‘the mother of the English literary language . . . the first and greatest story-book of the English people.’ And yet I doubt not that even this good thing owed its inception to Semitic influence, being adopted by Alfred the Teuton from the Hebrew Bible, just as, we shall see, he adopted so many other ideas.

CHAPTER IX

Alfred's Dooms

I BREAK off in the midst of my narration of the good works, well done, which occupied our Hero-King during the twelve years that succeeded the Peace of Wedmore, to relate an event which must have been a rude interruption to the country's peaceful progress.

In the year 885, some Danish marauders who had been at their usual pastime along the Netherland coast crossed over to ours, came up the Medway, and besieged Rochester. Now note the effect of the new order and discipline. The citizens, by themselves, successfully withstood the invaders, until the King, with the men of Kent and Surrey, or some of them at least, arrived on the scene. Then at once the Danes take to their ships, and, crossing the Thames estuary, seek refuge in the harbours of their kinsmen in Essex and Suffolk. There they are joined by certain of the settlers in those parts ; let us say, for the sake of charity, they were those who had not become Christians. Alfred by this time has mobilized a por-

tion of his fleet and is after them. They come to action ; the pirates lose all their spoils and suffer much loss of life. None the less, the King got not off scot-free, for in returning to port he was again attacked, and in this second encounter he was worsted to some extent. It seems likely that in this last action Rollo, or Rolf, the Viking, who afterwards founded the duchy of Normandy, was a commander for the Danes, even if, as is suspected, Athelstan-Guthrum was not also of the party.

This was the only hostile landing on Alfred's land during twelve years, though, on the opposite coasts, the Northmen were as busy as ever. Such wholesome respect had these wild gentry for Alfred's sword and skill !

They produced, too, another good result. Rhodric Mawr—Roderick the Great, as we should say—paramount chief of North Wales (*i.e.*, Wales proper), in dying divided his country among his sons. Some of these, feeling their weakness, voluntarily put themselves under the overlordship of Alfred, four at least of them undertaking to be to him even as Ethelred, the Alderman of Mercia, was. By-the-by, I may remark here that Asser, who was a Welshman, remember, accuses the latter of violence and tyranny towards the Welsh Princes on the border, and gives that as a reason for their seeking the protection of the King ; but the Saxon writers put another light thereon, inferring that it was family jealousy that

brought them to Alfred. Whatever the cause, the event happened in the year 885.

From that date until 892, Alfred's kingdom was quite undisturbed, so that he was able, without let or hindrance, to devote himself to more congenial but equally onerous works. Let us speak of such ones as we have not yet referred to.

The continual wars and rumours of wars up to the year 878 had quite disorganized the administration of justice. Now the King set himself to put matters right in good earnest, and, with the advice and counsel of the wise men in gemote assembled, to make and collect a code of laws. I say 'collect,' for many of the 'dooms,' as the Saxon text calls them, are merely old dooms repeated, as Alfred himself states in his preface to the code, the wording of which exhibits great modesty, together with respect for the opinion both of ancestry and posterity. Among others, he adopted *en masse* the dooms of Ina, that King of Wessex who, a hundred years earlier, did so much fighting against the Britons and Mercians, and who in later life vacated his throne and went to Rome to live.

How think you Alfred commences his code? By an almost literal transcript of the Decalogue, followed by a selection from the ordinances of Moses, as found in Exodus, chapters xxi. to xxiii. What think you of that, O legislators! and would-be legislators of modern England? Quoting Moses as an authority!

Why, it is scarcely permissible to even mention the Christ as an authority in Parliament in these superior times. But, then, Alfred was a primitive Christian and in earnest! If not always enlightened, he certainly was always anxious to carry out his convictions without fear or prejudice. 'His own aim as a law-maker must be,' says Thomas Hughes, 'to recognise and declare those eternal laws of God, and as a ruler to bring his own life, and that of his people, into accordance with them.' And, be it pointed out, neither were the Levitical ordinances so very incongruous among a Teutonic people as may be at first imagined. The Saxons, as the Jews, were a people being newly indoctrinated into monotheism; each had a strong sense of individual liberty; each was girt about by enemies; and each had certain social institutions and ideas in common, such as the holding of bond-slaves and the principle of compensation for injury.

To illustrate my point, and at the same time to give some samples of Alfred's legislation, I will quote a few of his dooms:

Doom II.—'If any man buy a Christian bondsman, be he bondsman to him for six years, the seventh he be free un-bought. With such clothes as he went in with such go he out. If he had a wife, go she out with him. If the lord gave him a wife, go she and her bairn the lord's. If the bondsman say, "I will not go from my lord, nor from my wife, nor bairns," let then his lord bring him to

the church door and drill through his ear with an awl, to witness that he henceforth ever be a bondsman.'

Compare this law with Exod. xxi. 1-6. And again, this one with Exod. xxii. 1:

'If anyone steal an ox, and slay or sell him, give he two for it, and four sheep for one. If he have not what he may give, be he himself sold for the fee.'

Similar modes of restitution and punishment were enacted against various felonies and misdemeanours. Mr. Hughes points out that apparently the oath had no legal sanction hitherto attached to it, but Alfred is very careful to enforce its nature, and guard against an infringement by penalties.

The third and fourth verses of Exodus xxiii. being ambiguous, Alfred puts what he thinks they *should* mean:

'Doom thou very evenly: doom not one doom to the wealthy, another to the poor; nor one doom to the more loved, other to the more loathed doom thou not'—an excellent principle for all jurisprudence, surely!

He winds up his adoptions from Moses, which were, remember, really the laws of England a thousand years ago, with—

Doom XLVIII.—'Swear ye never to heathen gods, nor in nothing call ye to them.'

We wonder whether he thought this caution

necessary still for his own people, or whether it was meant for his Norse neighbours in the Danelagh.

Passing on to the greater body of civil and criminal law, which is distinctly Teutonic in spirit and origin, we note its leading principle to be that practically all offences can be expiated by fine, or rather, by compensation to the injured party or parties. Each man had his price—not in the evil sense we read into that phrase, but in this : that an injury, physical or otherwise, done to a man, was estimated according to the *injured* one's social position. For instance : If Jack Straw broke into an Alderman's or a Bishop's house, he was to pay a 'boot' of sixty shillings ; if into a twelve hyde (say 1,000 acres) thegn's house, thirty shillings ; if into a cheorl's house, five shillings ; but if Jack was mean enough to commit the act while the men were 'out' with the army, or wicked enough to do it in Lent, then the 'boot' was doubled. And similar scales of prices were fixed for all manner of offences. While for those in which death or permanent injury ensued threefold compensation was paid : (*a*) to the injured one, if still alive, so much per member rendered useless, or, if dead, to his family, for loss of service ; (*b*) to the man's immediate overlord for his loss of service ; and (*c*) to the King, for the breach of his peace. No less than thirty-three dooms are given up to valuing wounds, the penalties varying from two

shillings, the value of a finger-nail, to a hundred shillings, for the tendons of the neck, reckoned on the cheorl's scale of prices.

But supposing the offender was unable to pay, what then? Here comes in the peculiar Teutonic institution of communal responsibility—an excellent preventive of crime, I should imagine. For if the man could not pay, then the tithing, or village community (or his guild, in the case of a town-dweller), was looked to for payment. Furthermore, the defaulting criminal could be, and frequently was, sold as a bond-slave, to pay, or help pay, the 'boot.' Such bond-slave, however, must not be confounded with the serfs and theows, or slaves of the land, who were such by birth.

As there were no banks, there were no bank-holidays in those days. But of legal holidays they had more than enough, I should imagine. Twelve days at Yule, 'the day that Christ overcame the Devil;' fourteen days at Easter, about a dozen other saints' and holy days, and all Sundays, were occasions on which no cheorl (*i.e.*, freeman) could be compelled to work for his lord; but the poor serfs had to be content 'with whatever was given them in God's name.' Should a theow work on Sunday by his lord's order, the lord must pay thirty shillings; but if the theow work without orders he is to pay hide-gild—that is, have a whipping.

Such are some of the multitudinous laws of Alfred's

code, which, while it distinctly supported caste, yet enacted great precautions against tyranny 'twixt class and class.

It may have been noticed that I have mentioned nothing about punishment, properly so called, save in the case of the serf for Sabbath-breaking. But the law-breakers did not get off with fines only, in many cases. They *paid* value for value. But they had *done* wrong acts. For this the civil authority handed them over to the Church, and the Bishop or other 'spiritual master' imposed what penance he considered appropriate to the offence. This practice continued for many centuries, and disappeared only as the State and the Church became separate and oft-conflicting entities.

There was one offence, however, for which direct personal punishment was inflicted by the code, and I mention it to give a glimpse of the Saxon character and Saxon manners up to this period. I refer to brawling in the King's hall. It evidently had been rather common theretofore. But, let us remember, that till a short while before Saxon Kings were but chieftains of clans and in constant contact with their followers—and we know what it is said familiarity does. But it was scarcely that, I think, that called for Alfred's stern doom. He knew that his people were naturally quarrelsome; that they were apt to ride the maxim, 'that Jack is as good as his master,' to unreasonable lengths; and that, above all, they

were too prone to get drunk and forget themselves. So it was enacted that if a freeman brawled in the King's hall he should lose an ear, while if he used his sword there, or in folk-mote (*i.e.*, district council), he was to lose the offending hand.

And here I must quit Alfred's code of dooms.

CHAPTER X

‘ An Upright Judge ’

NOW, as anyone knows, it is one thing to write down rules and another thing to get them carried out. So Alfred found. Owing to looseness of government consequent on generations of intertribal wars, and still more to the utter disorganization of society through repeated Danish invasions, the country was in a miserable state of lawlessness. The great woods of the country were full of robbers and outlaws. Many of these had been driven there by having their houses and belongings burnt or carried off by the Danes. Their goods, and peradventure their women-folk, were gone ; they had nothing to which to return, so they stayed in greenwood, and lived on such fish, flesh, or fowl as they could snare, or on such toll as they could raise on more fortunate people that passed their way. Some were there doubtless for the simple reason that they liked the life, with its freedom from service to their thegn.

It was owing to there being so much war always

on hand, or else because they preferred hunting and hawking to sitting in Court, that the Aldermen of the shires had become lax in their judicial functions. These hereditary officers combined in their persons the offices of Judge, Sheriff, and General of the Forces of their respective shires. But as a matter of fact—perhaps of necessity—they were little else than the latter, so far as public affairs were concerned. The judicial authority was delegated to underlings—the vice-domini of the Chronicle—men who—at least, after Ethandune, when Alfred came to look into things—were so utterly ignorant and scandalously corrupt that it is recorded that the King had to hang forty-four of them in one year, by way of a hint to the rest. The modern equivalents of these officers would be, I judge, County Court Judges and Recorders. By way of a specimen case, I mention a certain vice-dominus, Cadwine, who, presiding at a trial on a capital charge, put himself on the jury, and then, when he found some of the jurors were in favour of acquittal, discharged them and put his creatures in their place, and so obtained his wished-for and paid-for verdict.

Some have thought that this story of Alfred's severity is spurious, because inconsistent with his disposition. But Thomas Hughes says that these men had their desert, and that Alfred was just the man to give it to them. I will leave it there, only adding that, of all abominations, an unjust judge is

the most abominable. Moreover, it may be remarked that Alfred wrote a treatise 'Against Unjust Judges,' which, though now lost, was extant in the time of the fourth Edward.

The first thing our King does to improve affairs is to separate the judicial and the executive functions in the shires. The Aldermen may keep the former on certain conditions; but for the carrying out of the law he sends new officers of his own. Shire-gerefes, he calls them; hence through Shire-reeve comes our Sheriff. 'On certain conditions,' I say. What ones? That they bestir themselves in attending courts, and in seeing to it that no bribery, intimidation, nor favouritism exist, that judgment be according to the laws now written down for their use. Asser quaintly draws for us a pathetic, if humorous, picture of some of these grim old warriors, who had stood by him in many a desperate fight, being summoned to explain to the King certain judgments from which he dissents. 'Had the judgment been given in ignorance, or through favour or hatred, or by desire of gaining pelf from the litigants?' Asser does not mention what happened in case they confessed to either of the latter reasons; but the fate of the vice-domini is at least suggestive. If, however, as was generally the case, they plead ignorance, then he would say: 'I wonder, truly, at your rashness, that, whereas by God's favour and mine you have occupied the office of the wise, you

have neglected the studies and labours of the wise. Either, therefore, at once give up the discharge of these duties, or endeavour more zealously to study the lessons of wisdom. Such are my commands.’ Then these brave, gray-bearded campaigners, who knew as much about reading as an average five-year-old of to-day, had, *nolens volens*, to set about learning to read, so that they might be able to study the King’s dooms, or accept the inevitable alternative. Fancy an old General—of, say, sixty—accustomed to obedience from all save one, after his wars are over, being set to master the mysteries of A B C, instead of taking his leisure and pleasure in hall and in field! Hard lines indeed! How those strange marks make him to sweat—ay, more than that desperate fight at Ashdown did! But he has to learn that K-I-N-G spells King, and that it means ABLE-MAN. Hard lines truly! But how about those other hard lines to the misjudged suitors and wrongly-convicted miserables in their courts? The greatest good to the greatest number is the greatest good to all. So these brave old fellows, rather than give up their dignities, set themselves with what stomach they can to learn from the teachers the King has provided, some of whom are priggish whipper-snappers enough, I have little doubt.

Then, too, the King was the High Court of Appeal. And a tremendous cause list he must have had, for the people perversely quarrelled, and in the

hundred and shire courts commonly questioned the ruling of its president, and desired judgment by the King. But 'tis said that, if one party knew his case to be weak, he was always willing to accept the local judgment rather than face the King, from whom it was believed no secret was hid. Whereas if both parties persisted, then Alfred knew full well that both thought their case to be just. To hear such cases, then, the King passed regularly from shire to shire. How he despatched all his work is a puzzle.

The matter, too, of the territorial divisions for administrative purposes had to be set in order. The shires were the largest divisions, and had probably long existed (though some have thought otherwise), but it was necessary to define their limits afresh. Then, they were split up into hundreds or wapentakes, and these again into tithings. These were not Alfred's inventions, for they existed ere his time and among other Teutonic races. But in his realms he rearranged them, and, what was more, so far as Wessex at least was concerned, he had them carefully set forth in a book, which was truly a survey of the kingdom. It was known as the Roll of Winchester, of which the much-spoken-of Domesday Book was but a second edition.

By this system of division and subdivision each freeman was a member of a certain tithing, unless he was a craftsman living in a burg or city, and then he

was a member of his guild. Each tithing was a component part of a hundred, as each hundred was of a shire. The tithing looked after the individual, the hundred after the tithing, and the shire after the hundred. In the tithing, or guild, all the members were responsible for each other's behaviour, and were 'warrantors, for each other in case of need'; and if as a body politic the tithing failed in its duty, the hundred court saw that it did it. By this carefully defined system of mutually responsible communities, justice, order, and relief of the needy were provided for.

Every householder had to keep a roll, in which was entered the names of his family and also of his theows (thralls) and serfs, who thus, too, had their place, though a lowly one, in the social fabric. Now, if there was a man who was not so fitted into his social niche, and duly recorded as being there, then he was outside the law; his life and belongings were at the mercy of anyone. He, in the phrase of the age, wore the 'wolf's-head,' and must take the risk of being treated as a wolf.

This system of inter-responsibility, known as 'frank-pledge,' manipulated through the territorial divisions, worked well in Alfred's time, when the population was small and uncongested, and when commerce and art were simple processes. Whether in our complicated life of to-day such a system might be more followed (for our Poor Law is

certainly part of it) is a very mootable question, which I leave to my reader's judgment.

In closing this chapter, I would remark that the system's essential point was that the life and property of the individual was not secured to him by the State directly, but by the local community of his fellow-men, from each and all of whom honour and truth, courage and loyal co-operation, were demanded on behalf of each and all. The State's function was to see that these bodies fulfilled their duties and to provide for the common safety of all.

CHAPTER XI

'The Heathen rage . . . and imagine a vain thing'

IT was in the full May-tide of Alfred the Good's reign, when,' to quote Mr. Hughes once more, 'all England was thrilling with new life, and light was beginning to penetrate into the most out-of-the-way corners, that the war-cloud gathered again.'

Though it had left our land alone for seven years, the army had not been idle. Northern France had been the scene of action, and terrible was the condition of that country at that period. But if out of sight, it was not out of the mind of Alfred or of Plegmund, for its doings are recorded in the Saxon roll. Yarl Hasting, who had been at Fulham in the Wedmore year, had never forgotten the island, and doubtless by advices from his cousins in Norfolk and Suffolk he was aware how fat and flourishing Wessex and Mercia had become. He had picked Northern France, Burgundy, and Flanders pretty clean. His raven was hungry, and the plump white horse of England was inviting. From the cliffs of Boulogne

this scourge of Western Europe, to whom Guthrum by comparison was peaceable and mild, looked and longed to be at it. It may have been—let us hope it—that Guthrum had kept Hasting's hands off England during those years. But Guthrum was dead, and Eohric, his successor, certainly did not restrain him by any means.

Hasting had lain more than a year at Boulogne, and had there built a great fleet. In the fall of 893 the camp was broken up, and 250 galleys filled with men and horses made across the Channel. They landed without opposition at the mouth of the river Rother in Kent, up which they towed their ships for four miles. Here on the border of that great woodland, the Andreds Weald, which stretched a hundred miles westward as far as Hampshire, they found a small stockade. This they stormed, and then entrenched themselves at Appledore. Hasting himself set sail from Boulogne with eighty ascs, passed through the straits and up the great estuary, and thence into a branch of the Medway. Ten miles up this channel he landed, and formed a strong camp at what is now Milton. This placed him on the northern edge of Andreds Weald, with twenty-five miles of wild, tree-covered country between him and the camp at Appledore. The positions chosen by the invader were strong ones of great strategical value, since the Weald offered splendid cover for an advance into the heart of Wessex. But if they

expected to accomplish this easily they reckoned without their host. The moment he heard of their arrival Alfred despatched his son Edward with a body of light troops to watch both camps, and as soon as his Aldermen joined him he himself marched into Kent and took up a strong central position. Now the new military system came to its test, and it stood it well. The Danes saw they had a foe equal to them in pluck and superior in discipline. The watching army is always alert, pouncing upon any scouting or foraging pagans ere they can get many miles. The old warriors among the Vikings notice that as time goes by the Saxon army does not dwindle as of yore. We know the reason. Nearly a year passed thus, both sides being too cautious to attack. Skirmishes there were innumerable, but no battle. Hasting had reckoned upon the Danes of the Danelagh joining him, but a strong hint that Alfred had sent them kept them, restless as some of them were, from doing so.

The Danish leader determines to try a move. Making a rendezvous for all his ships at Bemfleet in Essex, he suddenly strikes both camps, and with the united army slips past Alfred, and rapidly marches westward, evidently purposing to outflank the King and reach the Thames before he could be overtaken. The move was a daring one and well conceived. But at Farnham in Surrey Alfred came up with them. In the battle there the Danes lost all

their baggage and all their horses, yet managed to make good their retreat to the Thames, which they forded, but with the loss of many more men.

Rallying at Thorney Island, Hasting encamped there, and probably received supplies from his ships. Alfred sat himself down to watch again. And now his system showed its weak spot, for while changing his service corps he allowed Hasting to slip through his hands into Essex. His appearance there acted as the proverbial spark in a barrel of gunpowder. The Danes of the east and the north rose at once. They got together a large fleet, and sent it round to the South Coast to create a diversion. A hundred of these ships entered the Exe, and forty more, passing round the Land's End, invested some place in North Devon of doubtful identity. Alfred, on hearing of this, fearing that the Celts of Cornwall and Wales might join the Danes, determined upon dividing his force. Leaving part with the Ætheling to reinforce the Alderman Æthelred and protect London, he with the major portion marched into the West to relieve Exeter and the other burg, both closely beset. In due time he accomplished his purpose, and drove the Danes to their ships—only, remember, movements were slow in those days.

Meanwhile Hasting, having seen his women and children were safe at Bemfleet, marched quickly up the Thames Valley with a great host of old and new allies. Thence working to the northward, he carried

fire and sword into the heart of Mercia. Ethelred and the Ætheling, leaving London to the care of its citizens, followed them, issuing summonses to all the neighbouring earls and thegns. The response was magnificent, showing that Alfred's name and system were as powerful in Mercia as in Wessex. From all the surrounding shires, and even from Celtic Wales, thegns and chieftains flocked to join the royal army. Cheorls never waited to ask whether it was their month for service, but went. It was too warm for Hasting. He went off into Montgomery as fast as he could march. Arrived there, he entrenched himself at Buttington on the Severn.

This is a border parish, and old Offa's Dyke runs through it, I am told. Some sixty years ago, in digging foundations for a school, they found vast quantities of bones a few feet below the surface. How came they there? Listen! Scarcely had Hasting got into position on Severn bank than Æthelred and the young Prince arrived on the scene. No! they did not attempt the assault. They sat down and permitted General Hunger to do the fighting. In three weeks that implacable ally pressed the pagans so closely that they, having eaten their horses, were compelled to sally out in full force and attack the English on the east bank of the river. The struggle was desperate. Many—very many—King's men fell; but for every Englishman that was laid low a half-score or so of the enemy were

put to keep him company. Hence these poor bones. It was but a remnant that got away over Watling Street into Danish Mercia.

But Hasting was a man not easily beaten. Remember, it was Teuton *versus* Teuton—always a hard fight. So, putting his impedimenta into safety, he gathered up all the Danes of the East Coast that he could, and ere the English knew what had become of him was back again at Chester. We, knowing no reason, wonder why Æthelred had not followed him in his retreat, and allowed him no time to rally. It was a great chance missed. But Chester, rebuilt since the former wars and well garrisoned, was not surprised. So Hasting, destroying everything round about that he could not carry off, went into winter quarters on the peninsula of Wirral. So ended the campaign of 894, Alfred wintering in Devonshire.

In the spring of 895 some Mercian earl, whose name I cannot give you, made a dash at Hasting's camp and carried off his cattle and provisions. The Dane, therefore, must needs be on the move. This time he pays North Wales a visit. The chronicler does not tell us what he thought of the scenery of that beautiful district, but he does record his appreciation of the booty he collected in the verdant valleys thereof, with which he promptly retreated into Northumberland. There is some mention made of a battle at Stamford, *en route*, in which he

was worsted ; but the evidence is untrustworthy. The chronicler says nothing more about them till Hastings is once more at his stronghold in Essex, in the late summer, to which he had come by sea. There he is joined by the remnants of the fleet and army from the West.

Now, Hasting was as difficult a man to catch as a recent troubler of English troops under reversed circumstances has been. For, see, while the King is preparing a combined attack upon the camp at Mersea, he slips aboard his ships, and, much daring, sails up the Thames and fortifies himself in a very strong position twenty miles from London. By this, winter had come, and the English are dismissed to their farms and their wives—save a few to keep watch.

Early in 896 the Londoners, desiring to repeat a successful attack they made two years previous on Bemfleet, made another on the new camp. It was plucky, but ill advised. They did not score, but, on the contrary, were deeply scored, losing four King's thegns. When Alfred and his troops arrive, he sits down between London and the enemy, and, postponing the idea of attack, sends all the men that can be spared to gather the crops, like a careful and far-seeing leader. But one day, out reconnoitring along the Lea, on which the Danes were encamped, he noticed a point where the river could easily be diverted, so as to cut off their retreat by ship. He

commenced the necessary operations. As soon as Hasting became aware of Alfred's plan, he did not wait for the trap to be completed, nor for the bulk of the English to rejoin the army ; but, entrusting his women and children once more to the Danes of East Anglia, he marched so rapidly along Watling Street that Alfred's troops could not overtake him. He reached Cwatbridge (Bridgenorth), and there entrenched himself. Meanwhile the Londoners made short work of the stores and fleet at Mersea. All that was worth removal they took to London, and the rest they burnt.

Thus ended Alfred's wars. For as soon as the first signs of spring came the Bridgenorth camp was broken up ; the English Danes retired to their homes, having had enough of commandeering. Hasting and his oversea men got down to the East Coast, took to their ships, and sailed away to the Seine.

‘ Thanks be to God ! ’ says the chronicler. Amen ! say we. Let us pray God that we may never see a host of uncousinly cousins overrunning England. But, above all, may we as a people so conduct and order ourselves in righteousness, wisdom and neighbourliness that the Judge of all the earth may not have need so to chasten us.

CHAPTER XII

Alfred the Christian and Churchman

ALFRED had now permitted to him a few years of well-earned leisure, or, rather, comparative leisure, during which he could enjoy the fruits of his earlier industry, and watch the fair tree of his pride growing in strength and beauty. Alas! he had to do so without the companionship of many a noble friend who had ably helped him in his part of the making of England—a part by no means insignificant. The last war had swept into the tomb Swithulf and Ealherd; the Bishops of Rochester and Dorchester; Beorthulf, Alderman of Hants; the Reeve of Winchester; Ecgulf, his cavalry leader, or ‘horse-thegn,’ and many another valued and trusted friend.

But Alfred could not be idle. Still carefully keeping his eye upon the national defence, particularly in the matter of shipbuilding, he renews his efforts for the education and uplifting of his people by all means at his disposal. I have already written of him as lawgiver and administrator, as soldier

and author, and I will now look at him in other aspects.

Above and before all, as I have said, he was a religious man. 'Thorough' is the word that describes his character in every sphere of action, and thorough was he in claiming his religious privileges and performing his religious duties. Whether he held a correct attitude towards this or that doctrine or dogma is quite outside my purpose in this work; but this we may safely affirm, that while he recognised the Bishop of Rome as the highest authority in the Western Church, there is no trace of his believing in Papal infallibility or supremacy; neither did he in ritual conform to the Italian Churches. Indeed, local liturgies were still used both in England and elsewhere, and in the parish churches, at least, they were said in the vernacular.

I have already stated that Alfred built and endowed two new monasteries; but that was a mere detail. What vow, think you, he took shortly after Wedmore? It was no idle promise of the pie-crust type, but a solemn, never-to-be-broken covenant.

'He vowed humbly and faithfully to devote to God *half* his services, day and night, and also *half his wealth* such as justly came annually into his possession. And this vow, so far as human judgment can discern, he wisely endeavoured to fulfil.' So says Asser, and the good British Bishop goes on to tell how conscientiously he ordered this division

of his time and goods. The latter his revenue officers were strictly enjoined to see to, honestly calculating all the moneys, so that he might not defraud the Almighty on the one hand, or his people and his family on the other. As regarded his time, he gave orders to have made certain candles of wax of equal length and girth that should burn for four hours each. These were marked with rings of colours at equal distances, which, as they consumed away, marked the hours and the quarters, day and night, sunshine or cloud. Thus, ere clocks were known in this island, our hero regulated his allotment of time. One set of these time-candles burnt always before his private altar, upon which reposed certain sacred relics. By this hangs a tale which exhibits Alfred as an inventor. You must know that his altar, or at least the ark containing the relics, travelled on circuit with him, and you can imagine that very often the spot where the altar was placed would be a draughty one, and you know well what happens to candles, even ones of royal wax, when they burn in a draught. The guttering, the uneven consumption, and sometimes extinguishing of these upset the King's arrangements. On windy days he could never tell whether he was giving too much or too little time to his devout studies and exercises. He put on his thinking-cap and conceived the idea of the horn lantern. The direct descendants of those that he had made are

still with us on many a farmstead. Does someone smile at my calling this an invention? Please note, O switcher-on of incandescent electric lamps! that it is the *ratio of advance* that gauges the inventive faculty, and that from unprotected candle to horn lantern was proportionately as great a leap as from oil-lamp to gas. So please let Alfred rank among the great army of inventors.

As regards the King's allotment of time, I opine that he must have reckoned as God's service a good deal of his literary works, which were, in fact, mostly of a spiritual or moral nature, since otherwise it is difficult to imagine how he could have found time for his multifarious temporal labours. We are assured—privately, as it were—by Asser that he was in the habit of quitting his couch in the night, and, unattended, prostrating himself before the altar, where he would remain long in prayer and contemplation, and that to his last day of life he always had his Manual with him for perusal at odd moments. In all this the enlightened Christian of the twentieth century may see bondage rather than liberty, and superstition instead of spirituality. But let us remember his times and surroundings, and then our own inheritance of the ages, and pause ere we judge Alfred as to his outward religion. Besides all which, remember that these things are related to us by monks, naturally prejudiced towards asceticism and formalism.

Would you like to know how the half-revenue allotted to God's service was apportioned? Well, one-fourth of it was given in relief to the poor—of any nation—who came to him. We are assured that great discretion was used in its distribution, as, indeed, must have been necessary, unless begging was not fashionable then. The second fourth was for the two monasteries aforementioned. Another quarter was allotted to the King's schools, showing that he, at least, considered education as part of Divine service. The last quarter was reserved for the relief and encouragement of monasteries and churches and God's servants generally throughout Britain, Ireland and Brittany.

Such was King Alfred's idea of a right distribution of wealth. And his biographer asserts that though Alfred was careful that *all* his income should be distributed each year, and that a full half should be lent to God, yet God, mindful of his promise, increased his riches so greatly that he often bemoaned that he had so much wealth to discreetly use.

When Alfred first set himself to rehabilitate the wasted monasteries of the land, he found difficulty in obtaining suitable men to fill their stalls ; as, too, he did in providing fit and proper men to occupy the Bishops' thrones and the chairs in his schools. Many a clerk and priest he brought over from France, among whom was that Grimbald who had been tutor to Judith at the Court of Charles the Bald in the

days of Alfred's childhood. Some he imported from Ireland; some came from Wales, chief among whom was Asser, oft quoted. Grimbald, above mentioned, seems to have been a Churchman of Churchmen; and it is said—but on doubtful authority—that he caused great disturbance at Oxford* by attempting to eliminate from the studies there certain subjects which he thought to be not helpful to young Churchmen. Alfred rather sided with the liberal views, and Grimbald, to mark his disapprobation of the college clerks, removed the tomb he had had built for his own body from Oxford to Winchester. We wonder how much their alma mater suffered thereby.

Another foreigner was John, an old Saxon, who, like the last mentioned, was trained in France. He was Mass-priest to Alfred for some time; but when Athelney Abbey was finished John became its first Abbot. A story is told of how his strict discipline aroused the hatred of certain sons of Belial among the monks, and how they hired two ruffians to murder him in the church when he was alone. But John was a strong man—physically and mentally—and nearly killed his assailants. They confessed the

* It has often been claimed for Alfred that he founded the University of Oxford, but it is now generally allowed that the schools of Oxford existed before his day. What does seem highly probable is that he founded and endowed a school there, which in the XIIIth Century became University College.

names of their instigators, and—let us draw the curtain.

There was yet another John—a remarkable man. A Scot was he (*i.e.*, an Irishman), Johannes Erigena of the schools. He probably came to England as a place of refuge, having got into trouble with the Pope and the Gallican Bishops on account of a treatise he had written against the doctrine of Transubstantiation. Alfred welcomed him and gave him a good post in his royal schools; by which we may gather, I think, that Alfred did not fall in with the then comparatively new dogma above mentioned; and also, what is still more worthy of remembrance, that Alfred had no fear of Papal punishment before his eyes for thus entertaining a man who had offended His Holiness, but in whom he himself recognised at once a Christian and a stranger. The King must have entertained many angels unawares, methinks! John, too, had been at Charles the Bald's Court, and it is said that one day, when sitting opposite him at supper, the Frankish monarch, meaning to have a sly dig at the traditional love of the cup ascribed to John's race, asked (in Latin), 'What is there between a Scot and a sot?' To which John promptly replied, 'Merely the table!'

The catholicity of Alfred's sympathy is best seen, perhaps, in his despatch of two Saxon monks, Sigmund and Athelstan, to India, there to seek out, relieve, and commune with those Christians that he heard

were to be found there, namely, the descendants of those whom the Apostles Thomas and Bartholomew—according to tradition—had converted. This mission the monks fulfilled—in the course of years—and returned bringing back greetings and precious gems and spices, in return for the King's alms. Thus did Alfred anticipate by some eight hundred years modern English missions to India.

As an evidence of what Alfred's contemporaries thought of his zeal and discretion in religious matters, I cannot do better than mention that Pope Martinus in 883 sent an embassy to Alfred, bearing, with other gifts, 'a part of the rood on which Christ suffered.' This was one of the relics that always afterwards travelled with the King. A year or so later, at Alfred's request, the Pope freed the Saxon schools at Rome from 'tax and tribute'—surely a most remarkable act! Yet, notwithstanding this relief—perhaps in consequence thereof—the King annually sent a mission to Rome with greeting and, generally, with alms; but it is carefully recorded he sometimes sent *only* alms. Was it not to mark their voluntariness?

The public of that day, note, evidently had a considerable voice in the choice of their spiritual masters, since the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle itself, under date 890, has: 'In this year Plegemund was chosen of God *and all the people* to be Archbishop of Canterbury.' The italics are, of course, mine.

As will have been gathered from several incidents

already mentioned, Alfred kept the control of clerical affairs within his own kingdom in his own hand. There is no trace of Papal or any outside interference in the matter of patronage throughout his time, nor for many years later. The Bishops and the Abbots were therefore, as far as he could obtain a supply, men after his own heart—men whose life agreed with the doctrines they taught and the rites they performed. And it is difficult—though perhaps not impossible—to conceive any scheme of Church government better suited for the circumstances of the time and the dispositions of the people than this limited hierarchy which obtained a thousand years ago, under Alfred as Patron, with Plegemund as Archbishop, in the Church in England.



ALFRED'S JEWEL (SEE NEXT CHAPTER).

CHAPTER XIII

Alfred the People's Comfort

‘ If then ye would enjoy a happie reigne,
Observe the statutes of our heavenly King ;
And from His law make all your laws to spring,
Since His lieutenant here ye shall remaine.

‘ Reward the just, be steadfast, true and plaine ;
Represse the proud, mainstaying aye the right ;
Walke alway so, as ever in His sight,
Who guardes the godly, plaguing the profane.
And so ye shall in princely vertues shine,
Resembling right your mightie King divine.’

JAMES I.

IN the last chapter we dealt briefly, among other things, with that half of Alfred's revenue that he devoted to sacred or religious objects. The other half, you will remember, was reserved for secular and political purposes. And how, think you, was this moiety of his income distributed ?

Well, in this, too, he was very methodical, for he divided it into three definitely proportionate parts. Asser says they were all thirds ; but this I think unlikely, considering the probable relative needs of the recipients. The first part he paid to his soldiers,





INTERIOR OF DEERHURST CHURCH, SHOWING UNALTERED SAXON WALL
BETWEEN NAVE AND TOWER.

(By permission of Mr. W. North, Tewkesbury.)

The built-up window represents the earliest Saxon attempt at an arch ; next in date would come the triangular aperture—emblematic, probably, of the Trinity ; while the double window indicates the improved style and work inspired by King Alfred.

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his ministers, and the Court attendants. Now, it is doubtful what we are to understand by 'soldiers' here; for I must tell you that military service in the field or elsewhere did not, constitutionally, carry pay in those days. It may be that it refers to his own bodyguard of cheorls from his own manors, and that the money was paid for their keep. But as that could surely not have absorbed so much, it seems more likely that, though custom made service obligatory without remuneration in war-time, yet the regular periodical assembling every year—war or no war—was a different matter; and being an innovation of the King's, the King in his scrupulous equity recouped the cheorls for their loss of time when called up for training and garrison duty.

The second part went to that great industrial army of his—the skilled artisans whom he had gathered into Wessex and Mercia from all countries round about. For he had found the English workmen terribly behind their neighbours in most of the crafts of the day. Building, as we have seen, was a great hobby of Alfred's, and a large share of this crafts-promotion expenditure must have gone to the masons and joiners. Now it was that the style of architecture known as Saxon, with its plain round pillars and semicircular double arches, its large wall spaces composed of small stones layed *en chevron* or in some other fancy mode, came into vogue, being probably imported from the Netherlands. One other craft

which the King especially fostered was that of the goldsmith and jeweller. A beautiful specimen of an enamelled jewel was found at Newton Park near Athelney in 1693, and is now in the Ashmolean Museum at Oxford.* It is of gold, with a figure holding a flower in each hand, worked in various coloured enamels under a plate of rock crystal. On its rim is the legend, 'Ælfred mee heht gewyrcan,' which being interpreted is, 'Alfred had me worked.'

The last portion of the royal secular expenditure was pledged for the support of foreigners who came to him from far and near, 'whether they asked for money or not.' This hypothecation requires a strong draft on our faith in Alfred's wisdom and policy, as after the ample provision made under religious expenditure for necessitous persons, it seems almost superfluous. But doubtless it all disappeared—for Alfred believed not in surpluses—even as the Civil List disappears to-day, and, let us hope, with at least equal benefit to society at large.

And now it will be asked, Whence came the King's revenue? Well, it was collected from several sources, and as a preliminary I must remark that the lines between the King's private income and his public revenue were very indistinct, and the several contributions merged as soon as in the royal treasury. Alfred had no aims apart from the good of his people and the advancement of the Church of Christ.

* See illustration on page 117.

The first item, then, of public revenue was that which arose from various dues and tolls of the nature of Customs at certain places. Then came market tolls, deceased kinless-men's property, treasure-trove, and, last and chief, the King's proportion of 'were-gild'—that is, the fine imposed for killing or inflicting injury upon any of his subjects, for, as I have hinted before, the Englishmen of that day were prone to brawling and fighting, but found wounding one another to be an expensive pastime.

The second source was that of Crown lands, which were probably considerable, since we find that Reading, Dene, and Leonaforð are called 'royal burghs' by the Chronicle, and as they were not devised by the King's will, they were doubtless—as must have been several others—considered Crown property as distinct from Alfred's private estates.

Thirdly, there came the private property, which was very extensive, including manors in every shire in the old Wessex kingdom proper, as well as in Kent, Sussex, and Mercia.

Now, the revenue from these sources increased immensely in the latter years of Alfred's life; chiefly, no doubt, by reason of the increased productive power and value of the land, but *not* in this case from *unearned increment*, since it was the skill, bravery and perseverance of Alfred that had saved the kingdom from destruction and brought peace and stability to the land, as it was also his wise and provident

encouragement of the arts that had made it so productive. Asser speaks admiringly of the work of building up the national industry, which went on under his own eyes, through the wise fostering care, example, and discipline of the King. Unlike David, he saw a *good* man prospering like a green bay-tree; and the monk asserts that 'for all his outlay the Lord has restored him tenfold.' But Alfred did not repine like Solomon at the burden of his wealth, nor did he kick like unto Jeshurun when he grew fat, nor grow mean like some millionaires, nor purse-proud like so many others of these later times, but he diligently and humbly sought to make the best use of it. He held the secret that destroys the poison in the gold. He shall tell it to us himself:

'Thou hast well taught us that that which we looked upon as our own—that is, worldly wealth—is but strange to us and transitory, and Thou hast taught us also to understand that what we thought strange to us—that is, the kingdom of heaven—is our own.'

No story of Alfred's life nor study of his character can be complete without a glimpse of his home life. Unfortunately for our curiosity, there is scarcely any record of this in history, save as we can read it here and there between the lines of the Chronicle and of biography, if, indeed, Asser's monograph can be called a biography.

Of his wife Ethelswitha we know hardly anything

save by deduction. Let it suffice that she was the wife of Alfred and the mother of such men and women as she was. I will therefore speak briefly of her children, and from them leave you to judge of *her* character and disposition, always recollecting that *their* education went on in the Court school immediately under the royal parents' eyes, and that the Court was constantly moving from one place to another.

The eldest child, Æthelfleda, was born in the first year of Alfred's reign, in the midst of war's alarms. She was married in early life to Æthelred, the Mercian noble, whom Alfred appointed Alderman of Saxon Mercia, as his Viceroy, after Wedmore. Æthelfleda was known as the Lady of Mercia, and shared the government with her husband, and when he was dead, and her father, too, she ruled that province well and gallantly by herself, keeping both her Danish and Welsh neighbours within their limits and her own people contented.

The eldest son was Edmund, an amiable youth, perhaps too good for this world, if that can be, for he died in boyhood.

The next boy was Edward, who succeeded his father upon the throne. He inherited most of his sire's good qualities plus a little more sentiment, which may possibly have come from his mother. His reign, though much troubled by a pretender to the throne, closed peaceably, with a Britain more

consolidated and united in feeling than it ever had been before. I have told you anecdotes of various kinds in this book, and now I want to tell you a love-story. Edward, like his father, was an ardent lover of the chase. Once, while out hunting, he remembers that his nurse lived near by, and, with a very proper feeling, he goes to visit her. Arrived at her hut, he is surprised and delighted to find there a young and beautiful girl whom the old woman had adopted as her daughter. She was the child of a shepherd, probably dead at this time. The youth, of course, falls in love. Of strong will and high morals, he determines to marry Edgina, and does so—apparently without his parents' consent or knowledge. How much the old nurse helped or hindered this result, who knows? But the tale runs that ere Edward put in an appearance Edgina had dreamt one night that the moon shone from out her body so brightly as to illuminate the whole land. She told this strange dream to the royal nurse, who, being somewhat of a white witch, saw therein a brilliant future for the girl, so that when Edward came she knew the omen was working out. We are not sure whether Alfred ever recognised Edgina as the Atheling's consort—I think he must have—but this we do know; that her son Athelstan was recognised while still a boy at Court, and when Edgina died in early womanhood, he was given to his aunt, the Lady of Mercia, to train. In the King's will he

was named for King after Edward, and in due time became so, even though Edward had other sons.

The fourth child of Alfred and Ethelswitha was Ethelgeda (or Ethelgiva), who was noted for her learning and piety. She, as has been said, became Abbess of Shaftesbury Convent, the leading nunnery and the home of good works and mental culture for the high-born ladies of the day.

The next was another daughter, Elfrida, or Elfrith. She became the wife of Baldwin, Count of Flanders, eldest son of Alfred's playfellow and girl stepmother, Judith, to whom I have before referred. It is through Elfrida that our present gracious King traces his descent from Alfred the Great.

The 'Baby' of the family was Ethelward. He strongly inherited his father's taste for letters, and spent his life mostly at the 'schools.' It was probably of the two youngest children, or possibly of the two boys, that Asser writes: 'They had the love of all about them, showing affability and gentleness to all, both natives and foreigners, and were in complete subjection to their father'—as I have little doubt were all their brothers and sisters, saving always in the matter of the master passion, wherein Edward at least followed his own bent, as man for all time has and will.

And now I draw to an end. We have seen Alfred as a remarkable child, a promising youth, a diligent scholar, and a brave soldier under his brother's command. We have seen him as a great

leader of men and as a greater administrator. We have been with him in prosperity and in adversity, in sickness and health, in poverty and wealth ; but in each and all of these varying circumstances we have seen him maintain the same unvarying kingly character, the same calm hopefulness, the same patient, purposeful, persevering progress towards a clearly defined ideal. And what was that ideal ?

Just this, I judge—to make as many men happy as possible. He believed himself to be—as both his written words and his actions declare—an implement in God's hands for the salvation, temporal and spiritual, of those entrusted to his care, and of all others whom he could influence. His own people were to be protected, not only from outward but also from inward foes. They had been entrusted to him that he might lift them up—by arduous toil and many strivings, if need be—to ultimate peace, to greater physical comforts, to an enlarged mind, and, above all, to a truer, deeper knowledge of God through the revelation of His Christ. And his steadfastness of purpose, his wealth of mind, his remarkable breadth of sympathy, co-ordinated by his absolute trust in Providence, enabled him to accomplish this task as perhaps no other monarch ever has succeeded in doing. Surely, if any mortal ever had a right to the title Great, it was he. So far is he above the ordinary rules of criticism that we see no affectation, no suspicion of self-exaltation, in words which

he uses in speaking of himself, which in a smaller man would have been presumption. I refer to such confessions as the one he makes in his translation of Boethius, into which he interpolates this, *inter alia*, personal remark : 'This I will now truly say, that as long as I have lived I have striven to live worthily, and after my life to leave to the men that come after me a remembering of me in good works.'

Many a time have I wondered why Thomas Carlyle did not take Alfred as his supreme example of the hero as King. If ever there was an anointed monarch who was a hero, surely it was Alfred the Saxon. I know not, but it may be that he thought that Alfred in his writings savoured somewhat of cant, than which the Seer of Chelsea hated nothing—not even the Devil, I fancy—so much. But Alfred's religiousness and his pious writings were as far from cant as was Carlyle himself from sham. His religion was not a thing apart, but a part, and a *very large part*, of his life, for it was its guiding principle and its motive power. This fact, and this only, accounts for his leniency to Guthrum. He would rather save than enslave, or kill, his perjured foeman. How much greater a victory to win him, and his people, for Christ and to Christian civilization, than to wreak vengeance, just though it might have been ! This, too, would account for his sending back, unharmed (allowing that the story be a veracious one), the two sons of

Hasting to their father, when they had fallen into his hands during the last war, so that by this means he might draw the daring pagan towards the Light.

But let it not be thought that Alfred was too tender-hearted, too forgiving. He knew how to be severe at the right moment. We have heard how he treated the unrighteous judges. Listen again. A year or two after the last great war a small squadron of piratical Danes from Northumbria sailed up the Solent and caused much damage. The prisoners that were eventually taken were brought to Winchester, tried by a jury of freemen, found guilty of piracy, and forthwith hanged. Their act could not be called war ; they were rebels and outlaws by virtue of the Treaty of Wedmore, and by subsequent submissions of their national rulers. Their comrades, who were still cruising about like sea-hawks ever on the watch for prey, must be taught a lesson, and hanging was what the Viking did not like. Dare anyone to-day say, on the one hand, that their execution was not a just act, or, on the other hand, that Alfred was weakly lenient ? No ; there are times when stern justice needs have scope, when mercy would be wasted, when justice is mercy.

Yet another caution against misunderstanding our King's character. Though religious and a devotee to work, he was no ascetic. Personally fond of good company, his entourage was generally large, but his Court was pure—as pure as was that of his descendant, the beloved Queen for whom we this

year have mourned. Peace reigned there, but no gloom. Music and song, mirth and jest, had there their home, along with sterner pastimes and studies. Gleemen, posture-masters, and jugglers entertained the Court in hall after supper, only they had to remember where they were, and take no liberties. The King himself was a proficient upon the harp, and encouraged its use. He believed so greatly in the refining power of music that he often told his thegns, 'tis said, 'that to be ignorant of music is a shameful thing.' But in these, as in all affairs, Alfred was truly temperate, using, but not abusing, the Divine gifts.

The last four years of Alfred's reign were evidently of such profound peace that the chroniclers found nothing whatever to write about save the deaths of the Alderman of Wiltshire and the Bishop of London. We know not where the Messenger of Sable Pinion overtook him, but wherever it was, we may be sure, he was ready. His will had been made, and this, which was his last act as far as we know, was in perfect keeping with his life. None of his family, friends, or dependents were forgotten—even the slaves, and those whom he had manumitted from slavery, he remembers, beseeching his heirs and successors, in God's name, to in no way hinder the full completion of their liberty, as he had fully purposed. His last recorded words are those with which he closed this final testament: 'And let them' (his successors and legatees) 'seek also with a living

price for my soul's health, as it may be and is most fitting, and as ye to forgive me shall be disposed.' With this evidence that Alfred had adopted the belief in purgatory and the efficacy of prayers for the dead, we have here nothing to do, merely giving it as history, and as a proof that in death, as in life, he desired above all peace with God and with men.

And now, indulgent reader, pause one moment ere we bid farewell to *our* Alfred, for I hope you desire to claim a right of property in him.

In childhood his budding mind found his native land rent by internal dissensions, enervated by lack of discipline, and a continual prey to savage freebooters. The nobles had grown careless and slothful, clerks were but clerks in name, while the cheorls were drunken, disheartened, and grossly ignorant. With a consciousness begotten of inward conviction and outward token, he knew that he was born to rule, yet he hastened not to forestall Providence, for he would learn to rule himself ere he ruled others. In early manhood he had the sorrow of seeing most of the abbeys and churches, and many a town, lying as heaps of blackened ruins. Later he had witnessed Saxon England leaderless, while he and his Aldermen were in hiding from the then all-conquering Dane. He had experienced the service of God forsaken, the laws ignored, and the pagan's sword the only arbiter. But ere twenty years were passed a change

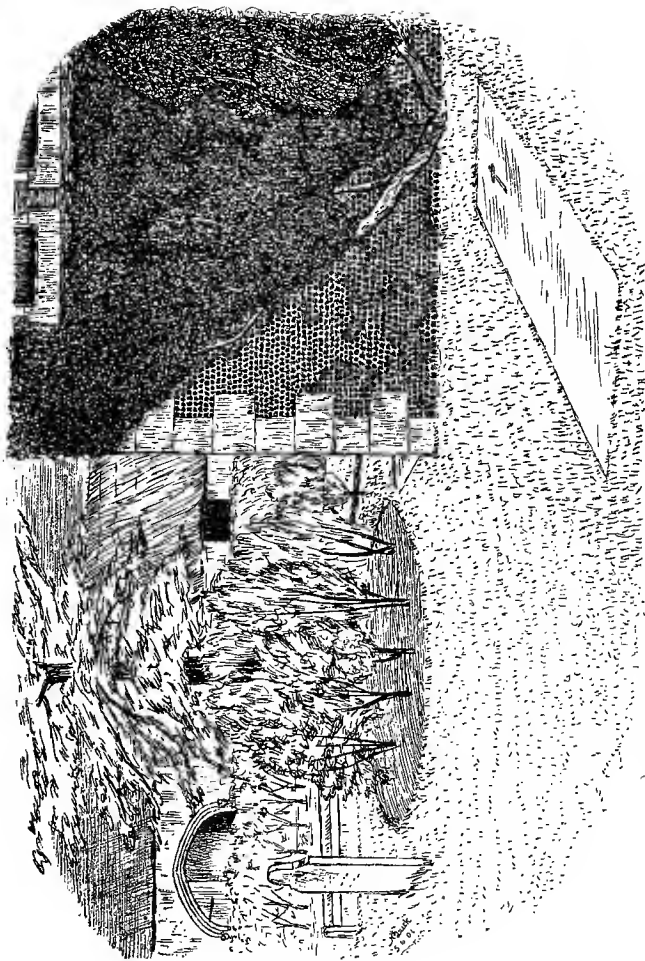
had swept across the land. All England south of the Thames, and the greater part of the Midlands up to the Mersey, together with a large part of Wales, loyally obeyed his rule as King; while Danish England acknowledged his supremacy, and was fast becoming settled and civilized. Abbeys and churches, more numerous and noble than before, had arisen in all directions, and were filled with real teachers of the people and true under-shepherds for Christ, instead of, as heretofore, with ignorant idlers and careless hirelings, who cared not for the sheep. He had seen, too, Old English become a written language, with quite a literature of its own, while Latin was now read by hundreds where units had read it before. Such respect had all learnt for law that it is said that the purses of money, which the King would leave about the bridle-paths and roads tentatively, were as safe as in their owner's pouch; and such respect had men for women and the King's justice that a maid could travel from Exeter to Canterbury, or from Winchester to Chester, unattended, without molestation, across a country that a quarter of a century earlier abounded in bandits and outlawed ruffians. A happy country, surely! A merry England, I believe, was this our land in the last year of the ninth century—a merrier one than it had any right to be in the last year of the nineteenth.

And all this through the unique personality of

one man—a man who believed in his mission ; a man who, through failure and success, through bodily pain and frequent disappointment, ever maintained his faith, and hope, and love : faith which, among his contemporaries, earned for him the name of Truth-teller ; hope, which insured for him the justified title of Great ; and love, which made him in very fact as in words England's Comfort.

Shall we, dare we, who in this year of grace Nineteen hundred and one have committed to the cold marble in Windsor Park, amid the genuine grief of a world-wide Anglo-Saxon Empire, the remains of our beloved Victoria the Good—shall we, dare we, hope ever to look upon *her* like again, or upon the like of him who passed just a thousand years ago, on the twenty-fourth of October, from his earthly crown to the well-earned one that fadeth not away ? He had lived only fifty-four years, but he had lived them well. His body was interred in the New Minster at Winchester—the church whose erection he had so lovingly watched—where it lay till—— But what have we to do with a dead body ? For us he lives !—lives as Alfred the Great, the one king whom History, so far, has pronounced to be

A PERFECT PRINCE.



Drawn by N. Quick.

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The stone with the cross marks the site of the resting-place, at Hyde Abbey, of Alfred's remains from about 1100 to 1536. The gateway on the left is all that remains of Henry I.'s monastery.

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